

A Witch in the Wrong Place

by James Thomasos

Year 20

Chapter 1: Definitely Not A Spider

A Chore Girl Called Nova

I had just finished my early morning shopping in a small city in the Eastern territories called Shanae when it happened. I'd spotted a nice little bench under a tree between the market district and the South Gate; outside of which Hushpuppy and I had set up our home. In the mid-morning's fading mist, a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the tall, white ash tree and the slowly brightening horizon made hundreds of little shadows dance on the bench beneath. I decided to rest there for a spell and do some light reading. I'd recently gotten myself a new book - you see - shortly after arriving in town. It was one of those cool sort of young adult-type novels about badass ladies doing badass things to their enemies and occasionally to each other and-

Oh, right! The thing that happened.

It wasn't much of an occurrence to be honest - as I ended up writing in my diary later that day - some person came up to me at the bench just as I was getting ready to make my way home.

"Y-you... g-g-give me your c-coin. And no one g-gets hurt." The stammering gentleman was a bit of a mess: scraggly, curly black hair with a short, unkempt beard. He was visibly shaking, limply holding a small pocket knife in his right hand out in front of him, pointed vaguely at me. Focusing my PsyEn into my eyes to generate a Third Eye effect, it was pretty obvious from his dim, thin Coating that this guy was on his last legs. He wasn't visibly wounded and he didn't have the scent of someone who was ill, but his clothes hung off of him in such a way that implied starvation. He wasn't a bad person; just hungry and scared.

I felt a slight twinge on the edge of my awareness and sighed; I'd have to move fast if I wanted this to play out the way I'd prefer it to.

"Hmm, I've got a better idea. Hold on a sec!"

"W-what are you-" I stood up and traced a quick door in the dirt with my foot. I dug a 'doorknob' in with my heel the same way Hushpuppy tended to and gauged my work; a bit sloppy, but even with a Coating as dim as his... he should be fine. I grabbed my groceries off the bench and beckoned the man towards me.

"Come!" I reached down and opened the door that I had drawn in the dirt. I heard the man gasp behind me as he took one step in the opposite direction that I'd just requested.

"Y-you're *The Witch*?!" The man was already putting away his knife, quickly recognizing the power gap at play here.

“No-no-no! I’m just a Chore Girl who *works* for **A** Witch Called Hushpuppy. I’m not going to hurt you, so come and have some lunch with me.” I extended a hand towards him and smiled. He gawked at me in disbelief for a few seconds, but in the end his self-preservation instincts pushed him towards food and he took my hand as we stepped through the Threshold. He sucked in a breath behind me as we began to freefall for a split second, only for us to reorient in midair as our feet touched down within a restaurant-bar called Charlie’s in Shanae.

It was a fairly large establishment; it could probably fit six dozen or so people if most of them were willing to stand and drink. The interior was pretty much equal parts ashy grey stones and dark cherry woods. It had the sort of drafty design that lent itself well to keeping cool in the Summer, but not so warm in the Winter; a weakness offset by a staggering three freakin’ fireplaces scattered around the room. This must normally be *quite* the busy place, otherwise I couldn’t really figure out how this Charlie fellow stayed in the black with *this* much overhead.

“Go ahead and take a seat!” I pointed at a table and made my way up to the bar.

It was a touch warm out, so I figured I’d get us each an order of Charlie’s famous cold noodle dishes with some extra servings of crunchy veggies and some saucy meat. I went up to the bar and put down a slight excess of coins, insisting that the order be done promptly. The publican raised his eyebrow at me, but wasn’t about to argue with money. Since it was a cold dish and I had no interest in having the meat warmed, he brought out two bowls with some utensils right away.

“Awesome, thanks! Please bring us some water too!” I told him as I snatched the meals and brought them back to the table where the starving gentleman sat.

“Hey there! Dig in! My treat!” I sat across from him and did just that.

“...” He made no move at first and simply sat in silence while I slurped my noodles. I stopped and looked at him quizzically, wet noodles hanging from my mouth.

“I j-just don’t understand...” The starving man bemoaned as he stubbornly sat in front of the food I bought for him.

“You’ll think better with some food in your stomach. *Eat.*” To be honest, I don’t know if there was any Magic behind the suggestion I gave him or if he just needed one more little push, but he immediately and voraciously devoured his meal.

“Take it a bit slower. I’ve read you can get really sick otherwise.” I chided him gently and he slowed his pace, although not by much. We ate in silence for the next several minutes. He was tearing up as he ate and drank. I had to wonder how he had gotten to a point like this in what otherwise seemed like a nice and big town.

“So... what happened?” I asked him after he began to slow down his consumption. He glanced up at me and tilted his head, not quite understanding what I meant.

"Like... What happened that left you starving and trying to rob a Chore Girl on a bench? If nothing else, I feel it's important that you tell me *that* much." He averted his eyes - clearly embarrassed - and coughed lightly to clear his throat.

After a bit of time to compose himself, he began his explanation, "I... had a few bad decisions in a row. A mistake here, a misplaced trust there, you know how- well... Maybe you don't know how it is. You seem quite young. I'd call you reckless, but I can see now that you're something... else." His Coating was already a lot stronger than it had been and he had his Third Eye open as he inspected my Coating.

I'm sure I looked pretty alien to him, to say the least.

"Just a Human, sir. Except I spend a lot of my time around Witches. But still a Human, nonetheless. Do continue." I never really liked how closely people tied the *nature* of one's PsyEn Coating to their relative Humanity.

"I-I see... sorry... Anyways... I fell into some debt and made a couple bad enemies trying to get out of said debt. It all happened so fast. Too fast."

"Yikes. I can't even imagine..." He's totally not gonna be okay after he leaves here on this trajectory. A good meal is just a stop gap when it comes to spiraling poverty. It's a shame really, I expected a nice town like this to have a bit more social security.

Back at the house I had a personal stash of coins that I mainly used for assorted knickknacks, decorations, and gifts. Since it's personal, it always tends to be in arms reach... or something. I reached out in between the man and myself, swiped at the air, and a bag of coins appeared in my hand. As ever, I shook my head at the success of the displayed nonsense and set the bag down between him and I.

"This should help you."

He eyes the bag suspiciously, "You're giving this to me...?"

"Not quite giving, I can't really do that. No, I'm *buying* something."

"I... don't have anything to sell..."

"Oh we all have *something*. You've still got your Mind and Substance. You can use those to help out someone. Are you familiar with the Chester farm to the South of the city."

"...I am..."

"Good. They've been very kind to me and given myself and Hushpuppy very good prices at the market. Their eldest son recently injured his back, however. Go help them until they don't need help anymore. If you do that, then the money is yours."

"That's it?" He blurted in disbelief as he took the bag into his hands.

"That's it. Please don't betray my trust, now. It seriously won't go well for you. Now then: if you're all finished, you are free to go!"

"For real... You're actually for real."

I cocked my head at him curiously, "Of course, unless you wanted more?"

"N-no of course not! I just... what do you *want*?" His eyes were still wide with the same disbelief that he'd demonstrated when I brought him through my threshold.

"From you? Nothing. I mean, you don't have anything to give based on what you told me. If you ever strike it big, come spend a bunch at Hushpuppy's Traveling House of Wonderful and Terrible and Amazing Items."

"...I see. Thank you... **Truly.**" He stood up from the table and sauntered towards the door. I watched him go, feeling pretty good myself, but then-

"**Stop.**" I commanded him and he froze in his tracks just a couple strides from the door. I snapped up to my feet and brusquely stalked up to the entrance to the tavern. I grabbed the doorknob and pulled the door open towards me - despite the fact that said door pushed from this direction - and glared into the unsettling, impenetrable darkness beyond the Threshold. I slammed the door shut and pushed the door open this time, revealing the normal street beyond the threshold.

"Uh-"

I turned towards him with what was probably a clearly irritated smile and gestured to the bustling street beyond the doorway, "Have a lovely day, sir."

He stole one more cautious glance at me and scampered outside, unaware of how close he just came to a terrifying and lonely death. I shut the door behind him a bit more forcefully than intended and took a deep, calming breath while I stared at the door.

"*The Slaughter House*, Hushpuppy? **Really?!**" I shouted at the mostly empty tavern, drawing several curious glances in response. I tapped my foot for a few seconds until I suddenly heard a collection of gasps as A Witch Called Hushpuppy appeared - likely out of thin air - behind me.

"*What??* You seemed like you were done with **your** thing, so I figured I'd do **my** thing!" I whipped around to see her sitting at the table I'd been sharing with the starving man.

"...And 'your thing' in this case was *murdering* a man I *just* finished showing *mercy* to?" I gave her an accusatory look as I sat down across from her and beckoned over a waiter who approached trepidatiously. I told him to double the entree I'd ordered earlier and turned my attention back to Hushpuppy. Her head was cocked at a heavily exaggerated tilt, her dark blue hair hanging across her face and she had one eyebrow raised above her black and blue eyes; a portrait of confusion.

“...I do not understand how you do things at all, child. You were in danger. There are *consequences* for putting you in d-”

“-What ‘danger’ - exactly - was I in, Hushpuppy?”

“Well he had a knife.”

“OoOoH a kniiiiife. *Terrifying*. Seriously? He was *starving* and barely had a Coating!”

“Well I can’t see those!” Ugh.

“Granted. But *I* was outdoors with plenty of dust-like stuff around. I would have been fine! Also I can use MAGIC, Hushpuppy! Remember!?” This conversation was a long time coming and - as long as food had yet to arrive - I largely had her trapped in our little... talk.

“...But still...”

“No no no. This conversation is a long time coming, actually.”

“Oh *boy*.” Hushpuppy scoffed.

“So first thing is first: murdering people over slight inconveniences is *wrong*.”

“Well what if-”

“No-no-no! That is going to be the *given* here.”

“...Okay...?” Ooooh boy. I’d poked around at this topic with Hushpuppy in the past, but this was probably the first time I’d been annoyed enough to really lean into it.

“Now first, a question: do you hate Humans?” Starting reeeaaal basic here.

“Not particularly. You are a Human, after all.” How sweet.

“Uh-huh... So why are you so quick to take lives? AND before you say it: feeding people to other Witches counts as taking lives too.”

Hushpuppy arched an eyebrow at me bemusedly, “It’s kind of amazing that you still have such a... prey-ish view on these sorts of matters.”

“Glossing over *that*. Answer my question, please.”

“Well... you know how when you get shot with an arrow, it’s important to remove the entire arrow head so it doesn’t fester, right?”

“I wouldn’t know personally... But sure...” I don’t think I like where she’s going with this.

“Well it’s the same thing! If someone comes at you once then the only way to *guarantee* that they never come at you again is to remove them completely.”

“Remove them... from this mortal coil?”

“From this mortal coil, yes. Oh! Food!~” The waiter arrived in the middle of our conversation with the entrees that I ordered. Hushpuppy immediately began slurping up her noodles with a voracity that made me hungry all over again; she always made everything look so delicious. As we ate in relative silence - ignoring the furtive glances of other patrons - I had to wonder about just *what* made Hushpuppy so... thoughtlessly extreme in how she dealt with people. She was a Witch and that title meant she was at **some** point a regular person like me who had eaten a Fae alive. Thinking back, I’ve never asked her anything about her life as a Human. Judging by what remained of her Human features, she’d likely been in her early to mid 30s when consumed her first Fae.

“-get it.” Whoops, she’d been saying something.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“Psh! I was *saying*: I don’t have any recollection of you bringing this sort of thing up so vehemently in the past. I just don’t get it.” I suppose it *would* be a bit much to expect her to put two and two together on this one.

“Last year was... terrifying, Hushpuppy. That... woman that attacked us in Solona...” Her face immediately dropped into a scowl as I referred to the *incident*, “We both almost **died**. I’ve never been so scared of a *person* in my life.” Her gaze softened somewhat at that, as if only now remembering that I’m not used to facing my own mortality.

“Indeed. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“Well. Think about it: what must other people feel like when they are being trapped away by you or another Witch?”

“...? How should I know that? Especially when the point is to remove their perspective completely.”

“*Try*. Use your imagination! I refuse to believe that your imagination is *sooo* dull when you’re able to accomplish so much with Magic.” She slurped up the last of her noodles and contemplated the broth for a while.

“Bleh...” Hushpuppy sighed disinterestedly, but made no move to leave, “Well... probably... scared?”

“You can do better than that!”

“Uhh... Surely regretful? That they crossed me, no?” Oh wow, she got to ‘regret’ way faster than I anticipated!

“There you go! Now what do you think that regret might make them do?”

“If I didn’t get rid of the problem before it started, you mean? Come after me again - obviously - to avenge their wounded pride.” The reply would have come across as flippant from anyone

else, but Hushpuppy seemed to earnestly believe that anyone who came face to face with her incredible power would be *stupid* enough to try again.

“Why do you always assume the *worst* of people, Hushpuppy?”

“I’ve been around a lot longer than you, child. If someone never steals from you, or never makes an attempt on your life then they never will. But if they do it once, they *will* again.”

“That’s so... extreme. Do you have any quarrels for that?”

“Sometimes Nova, someone crosses you and you flatten their malice and tell them to make like the bees would. Then a decade later they’ve specialized due to their experience - went from Moonlighter to Witch Hunter - and during that time have murdered dozens of nascent buds who never even had a chance to create a Domain.”

“Does that happen... often?” I don’t generally think of Hushpuppy as valuing much of anyone outside of us and the Tea Party

“More than once. Now let me pose the same question to you: why do you always assume the *best* of people?”

“That’s easy. Because of *you*.”

She raised an eyebrow at me and rested her chin on her upturned palm, “...Explain.”

“I mean... think about it, Hushpuppy. What if I *never* moved past you murdering Jasmin? My life is undeniably amazing and full of awesome things that I never would have been able to do if not for you. You ended the life of the woman who was my mother in cold blood... but that was one bad day for me out of almost 15 years of good days.” Hushpuppy had looked off to the side bashfully halfway through my explanation. One of the attacks that Hushpuppy is most vulnerable to is my reminding her that - despite it all - I considered her to be my mother.

“That’s not fair...” Hushpuppy muttered sullenly.

“Agreed, that wasn’t fair. But... Here’s the thing Hushpuppy... you are *absolutely* right about murdering people ensuring that they never do any harm to you ever again. I won’t argue with results. But that’s just the thing, I don’t think one bad day should mean the end of everything. When you dump off these people who made *one* mistake of messing with you... you’ve ended their story mid-sentence. Sure, they can’t do anything bad to you or anyone else ever again... but what if they never were going to try that again? What if they were going to do something good afterwards? Or come back and buy a bunch of products later because you spared them?”

“I suppose it’s hard to know.”

“Right. Because they never got the chance to do so. Because you can’t do bad *or* good when you’re dead.

“But they would never show *us* that kind of mercy. Why should we show it to them?”

“Hushpuppy... I mean... Ugh. I guess... Okay fine I’ll put it this way: we would be dead if you showed mercy to Evelyynn because she was *that* much more powerful than us! The power difference between you and most other people is like that!”

Hushpuppy scowled slightly, “...And?”

“I guess I just don’t want us to be the Evelyynn of regular people’s lives; all indiscriminate murder and destruction and terror. I want us to at least *try* to be better if we have the opportunity.” I was quickly running out of steam for the conversation, even though it was my idea to have it. Appealing to the vestiges of Hushpuppy’s humanity was exhausting. I knew I wasn’t going to see any results from this any time soon... but at least she finally stuck around for me to say my full piece on the matter.

Hushpuppy sighed once more, “When did you get so... eloquent? I wonder. Such a cool adult you’re becoming. We’ve been here long enough, let’s go open the shop.” Oh shit! The store! Whoops! I had *plans* for the store today and got distracted! I stood up, threw down some coins and we promptly returned home.

A Witch Called Hushpuppy

Isn’t my shop a bit too big now?

We had entered the house and I glared dubiously at the almost 20 meter distance between the door and the front desk. It used to be 10 meters... or was it 8? It’s hard to remember nowadays. I **do** recall that it’s only supposed to take 5 strides to go from front to back of the shop, but now it takes 7... which is just the *worst*. Totally throws off my entire shop-entering-routine!

The last couple of decades had been dense with happenstance. Of course this was due to the trials and tribulations of raising a Human, but as a result... I can’t seem to remember just how my shop looked for the 100ish years before I brought Nova back here. I looked up and then to either side: the ceiling definitely wasn’t always *that* tall. It had to be close to 10 meters at this point! The ceiling must have risen to accommodate the theoretically adjacent space of Nova’s Library, which was... interesting, to say the least.

The dark brown, magi-warped wood that uniformly comprised the floor, walls, and ceiling of my house had thankfully not changed over the years. Unfortunately, the size and layout had drastically shifted, especially recently. There were six snake-like, wavy shelves that lacked sharp right angles in the storefront, two of which traced the left and right walls. They started a couple of meters from the front door and stopped a couple of meters before the front desk at the back of the storefront. The shelves too have gotten longer as the shop itself has grown, or rather, as Nova has always insisted on a uniformity of spacing of the products in the shop.

Like... I definitely don’t have the inventory to fill all of this space!

Okay that’s a lie, I *didn’t* have the inventory to fill all of this space, but Nova just had to go on an innovation spree during the last year. She’s constantly spouting off ideas for ‘useful tools’ that

would 'make Human lives easier' and 'generally improve local quality of life'. Real boring stuff if I'm being honest. She had me replicate certain gifts that I'd made her throughout her childhood, like that bookmark that makes a book follow you so you never lose said book. I argued that that Magic only worked because I used *her* hair to make it and then she's all like, "You could charge a lot more for on-the-spot custom orders!"

She's really become quite the merchant. Though I suppose she **did** have an amazing teacher!

Oh. Ugh. And then there were the ***flowers***.

Nova has been pushing this initiative for **years** where we *don't* keep most of the flowers in a storage closet, but instead put them on ALL OF THE SHELVES. Like, every single shelf has a flower, then lightning in a jar, then a flower, then unforgettable marbles, then a flower, and so on. Punctuating all of the *real products* in the store with low utility glowing flowers. The unfortunate side effect of this of course being that I now have to see those flowers no matter where I look in the store. Which normally would annoy me a lot more if it weren't for an **infinitely more** annoying fact:

Our profits have **never** been higher.

Yes, we are of course selling *waaaaaay* more flowers, but Humans appear to be experimenting with buying the other products in the store at an accelerated rate as well. They seem to have found some excavation-related purposes for Lightning in a Jar, for example. Someone even bought my Curse Sword, which I'd given up on ever selling 140ish years after making the thing! I wonder if we'll get to hear how *that* works out for them; I'm sure they'll become an important hero someday with such a powerful artifact in their hands.

Anyhow, the point is the shop runs pretty smoothly.

Nova and I had precious little to say to each other when we got back from our impromptu lunch lecture. She reached back out of the front door and flipped the hanging sign that she'd made years ago from 'Closed for Now, Turn Back For Your Own Safety' to 'Open, Please Knock!'. I felt the fuzzy feeling against the fringes of my *Soul* that acted as the prelude to Nova using her powerful PsyEn Ability - *Dust Bunny* - and there was a loud 'SHOOMP' noise as all of the dust and dirt and what not in the room gathered in the palm of her hand. She leaned out the front door and shot the bundle of gunk off into the wilderness with another 'SHOOMP'.

This child's Ability really is too convenient.

She shut the door and made the now laborious trek all the way to the front counter. Pulling out the cushion I made her that never loses its fluff and starting a new page in the ledger, she parked herself behind the counter and waited. Something felt a bit off though...

"No book?" She *never* didn't have a book with her when she was working the counter.

"Hmm? Oh. Nah. Today is going to be *waaay* too busy for me to be splitting my attention."

“Really? Why?” Did her Ability evolve or something? Can she now predict business? That’s pretty-

“It’s inventory update day! Remember?!”

“Oh?... **Oh...**” Riiiiight. I knew *something* else felt off when we walked in here. The shelves weren’t just glowing pink, but blue and also *purple*. Hopefully this doesn’t turn out like the *Stuffed Cat Incident* and backfire horribly on us.

“Yes! Today is a super special day that will eventually completely alter the shape of Human civilization as we know it!” Yikes now *that’s* a bit of an exaggeration. I held my tongue since she seemed particularly excited about it. I suppose this was a long time coming; Nova has been pestering me about ‘different coloured flowers’ for approximately her *entire life*, give or take half a decade or so. Of course, I absolutely have always outright refused to grow those stupid flowers on *purpose* - they’re weeds that grow on my rooftop, after all - let alone put actual effort into altering they’re default state!

But I suppose this isn’t just *my* house anymore, is it?

“Well if you’ve got things covered here and are super excited, I’m gonna go take care of some... *things*... Do you want some wine or something? You’re like an adult now, right?” Hah. That was totally inconspicuous!

“??!?” Nova gawked at me silently, her mouth slightly agape.

“*What*. You’re looking pretty funny right now.”

“Oh it’s just... I never really thought... I mean... I guess I’ve seen you imbibe before... But does alcohol even *do* anything for you?” Aw. Such concern.

“Not particularly, tall child, but like with Human food I *do* enjoy the flavour! Plan on making something tonight that goes with it.”

“Huh. Fair enough. Yeah I can do that. Why don’t you actually walk through the town for a change. If you’ve nothing else to do, there isn’t too much point in you walking directly into a tavern. It’ll probably stir up more business and curiosity if people see you out and about a bit more often”

“I suppose I can do that. But only for *business* reasons!” It mattered not. I would still have plenty of time for my errands. I held out my hand and my hat leapt from behind the counter onto my head. I exited the shop and made my way towards the not-terribly-tall walls of the city currently called Shanae. Our reasons for coming here had been three-fold: first, it was about as far East in the Human territories you could go and still find a sizeable population to sell to. Second, it was the furthest point from that big canyon I’d accidentally’d near the Western front. And of course, third: it was a place I had heard about Evelynn stirring a fuss in recently. The latter point *seemed* counterintuitive, but that little gremlin rarely stayed in the same region for very long.

As I understood it from local rumors, she'd found a new toy to play with... Sucks to be that poor sap!

Anyhow...

I approached the front gate and a couple of guards started to approach me... but then thought better of it. They didn't smell particularly scared of me - which kinda bugged me - but obviously they knew who I was. I hope Nova wasn't going around saying nice things about me again! She was really damaging my evil Witch reputation. At this rate more Moonlighters might start picking fights with me! Once inside the city about half the Humans I passed greeted me reasonably respectfully, all 'Good Afternoon, Hushpuppy' and 'Good Day, Hushpuppy'. The streets were annoyingly sharp in their geometry - I really preferred the more gentle layout of smaller villages personally - and the yellow brickwork of the Trade District was faded and peeling. Despite that the business appeared to be bustling and I once again sighed that we weren't allowed to set up shop directly within the trade district. Turns out, they were pretty wary of having any kind of Magician within the city walls for too long.

Turns out... that's part of why we're here. But I didn't tell Nova that.

Ssshh!

You see, a few months or so back this city had had an Evelyn Vandree problem to the tune of twelve serial murders and one severely traumatized detective. That means she was here for a little bit and - since she's a little creep - that means she was going to have a lab here. And if she had a lab here, she probably had a Threshold set up that would allow her to make a surprise entrance while we were in the area. That would be less than ideal.

Especially since Nova still has nightmares about that attack.

I mean... she's more afraid of a Human than any *Witch* she's ever met.

Unacceptable!

Anyhow, for the last few weeks that we've been set up here I'd hunted down and consumed three Fae that were setting up Mounds in the general vicinity. If I don't do that, it gets pretty hard to try to smell residual Magirradiation, even if I'm looking *inside* the city. With all of them out of the way (in my belly) I was now able to track even subtle traces of Magic. There was quite a bit around the pub that Nova and I were at earlier, but that definitely wasn't the place. As I sniffed around totally inconspicuously for an hour or two, I found myself in the warehouse district of Shanae. I came up to a fairly mundane looking stone warehouse labeled 3C; the only warehouse in the whole district that was letting off trace amounts of residual Magic.

That monster had been here, alright.

The door was chained shut - which was rude - so I told it to stop doing that and it unraveled nicely, falling to the floor with a satisfying *plink*. As soon as I did so, the three Humans who seemed to be under the impression that they were sneaky revealed their presence. One came

to a stop just a couple of meters behind me and two others had angles on me: one to the left from around the corner and the other above and behind some ways.

"A Witch Called Hushpuppy. I am Captain Nadine Kalamoto of the Shanae Security Force Investigative Squad. With all due respect, what exactly are you doing here?" I turned to face the speaking woman; she looked kinda similar to Nova in terms of skin and hair colour, but the eyes were a tad different. She appeared to be a sword-dancer and her hand immediately went to the hilt of the shorter of the two curved blades. Her blades were PsyMetal... but I could smell Meteoric Iron on her as well.

Someone was prepared!

"Just following my nose. I heard you all had an Evelyn Vandree problem recently. I came to ensure you cleaned up properly!" The Captain's eyes widened briefly in recognition and she beckoned over the man around the corner. He ran over and she whispered something to him, after which he scampered off elsewhere in a hurry. She relaxed her stance somewhat and looked me up and down slowly.

"You are... familiar with Evelyn the Bonesaw Killer?" What's with that title?! So goofy

"Sure am! Fought her twice now."

Her jaw dropped, "You... *fought* her."

"Yeah... She got away the first time and I got away the second time... So I guess that means we're one for one?"

"...Look. If you have intel on our literal most-wanted bounty. I have to ask you to come to the SF building and answer some questions." Oh wow that's ballsy. They put a bounty on her? Hmm... It *would* be kinda nice if she had to deal with the same kinds of distractions as me.

"Happy to oblige, but I really *do* need to go into her lab first. Then I'll tell you whatever you want to know about her."

"We have already swept her lab space, there is no need." Siiigh!~

"Says the non-Magician. Just come with me if you're so worried. Your sharpshooter can come too if you'd like."

"Wai-" I appeared directly in front of the Captain and shushed her with one long finger.

"I have quite the sense of humor, you see. Perhaps you've received some circulating rumor from my child that my well of humor is bottomless. And make no mistake... I am currently *humoring* you. But I'll run out of humor very quickly if you think you can stop me with a sniper, incoming reinforcements, and a Meteoric Iron dagger. Oh don't give me that look... I can *smell* it on you. Now come with me and learn something about how every skilled Magician leaves themselves a backdoor." To her credit, the glaring Captain did not even tremble or flinch when I touched her

lips. She even had the presence of mind to put up one open hand to halt her sharpshooter from taking action.

Finally she pushed my hand away from her face, wiped her mouth with her arm and said, "Fine. Lead the way."

"Perfect! Come along then!" With that, I entered the warehouse and continued sniffing around.

"If you are... smelling? For the lab, it's over there." The woman pointed off to the side at a comically inconspicuous piece of nondescript stone flooring, "There is a push-switch in the wall over here by the front..." She trailed off as I ignored her. After all, she was super wrong about the lab's location.

"That's not the lab, Human. Let me guess: there were a few corridors and then a large room with a bunch of 'monsters' down there along with some work tables."

"...There were."

"Foolish. That's not a laboratory, that's an *arena*. It is entirely likely that the 'killer' in question was just one room over having a blast while you frantically searched." Now where *wouldn't* Humans look for a basement?

"I'd thank you not to speak ill of our operation; many were wounded down there. If that isn't the lab, where *is* it?" Oh wow she went cold on me... must've struck a nerve there. Hmm, Evelynn wouldn't put a basement Threshold on the ceiling... but she'd probably put it...

"There!" I pointed at a point a few meters up the wall. There were no obvious slits or anything so sloppy. But the way *she* used Magic left a distinctly different kind of trace. You see, when most Magicians or Witches or Fae bend the state of reality, they just kinda let it snap back to normal when they're done. Sure, you get some pretty heavy fallout of Magirradiation but hey; the Fae don't care and that's why Humans have Coatings, right? Not Evelynn though... She's so damn *specific* about it. She makes changes, tugs and pokes and prods at the nature of things and... then puts it back *exactly* where she found it.

Almost exactly, I suppose I should say.

"Come up here, follow me!" I beckoned the Captain up and began climbing invisible stairs to reach the space on the wall. I could hear her hesitate behind me, but eventually I heard the nervous clapping of her boots ascending my staircase. Nova once asked me how I went about constructing purely theoretical but entirely interactable structures, but she got **super** annoyed when the totality of my explanation was: 'I met a mime once.'

...

Makes perfect sense, right? Honestly she was being *ridiculous* about the whole thing.

I came to a stop just in front of the blank wall and - uh what was her name... Oh! - Nadine stopped a step or two beneath me.

“Alright, Witch, what now?” Nadine looked skeptically up at me with her arms crossed, clearly not expecting much. I took off my hat and rummaged around in it almost up to my shoulder before pulling out a doorknob.

“We’ll use *this!*”

“A... doorknob?”

“Right! Watch!” I placed the doorknob where it ought to be on the invisible Threshold, twisted it firmly and pulled with all my might.

Nothing happened.

I tugged on it a few more times, confused. It is *definitely* here and now I’m totally embarrassing myself in front of this random investigator!

Oh. Wait a sec.

I pushed the door and it opened right up.

“...Uh?” The Captain vocalized behind me but I totally refused to look at her.

“I was... uh... checking for traps?” I lied convincingly and proceeded to walk into Evelynn’s Shanae Lab. This wasn’t the first of her labs I’d seen - although thankfully I’d never walked into one that she was actually inside of - but this was the first time I’d gone out of my way to find one of them. It was a windowless, stone, cubic space with various stone shelves that had glasses of various shapes and sizes upon them. The room was wrapped in an unnerving stillness and sterility that was compounded by the creepy tidiness. As ever, there wasn’t an actual cutting implement in sight.

She always used her hands for dissections, after all.

“Well I’ll be damned. What now?” Captain Nadine had walked in front of me to better survey the room before turning to face me.

“First: This-” I pulled out a small bell on a short chain and slapped it on the door. The chain quickly fused with the door, “-will let me know next time the door is opened. So if she comes back to this lab from elsewhere while we’re still nearby, my d- Chore Girl and I will have plenty of time to run.”

“So you literally just wanted to *find* this place?”

“Not quite.” I corrected her as I pulled out my kama-staff, “I also wanted to do **this.**” I just started swinging indiscriminately at the room, carving gashes into the walls, obliterating shelves, and turned glassware into shrapnel. The sword dancing Captain dove out of the way behind me and I heard her draw her blades behind me. After a few more swings to ensure that the destruction looked deliberate, I whipped around to face the extremely angry investigator.

“*What! The! Fuck!*” She shouted at me as the dust settled, “This was a fucking *crime scene!* Why would you do this?!”

I cocked my head at her, “Crime scene? No-no-no. You were never going to come back in here. You don’t have the capability to do so and it would really screw with my alarm bell plan. As to why... Well why else? We want Evelynn to know - or at least think - that she is being actively ***hunted***. After all the smol Witches she has slain... Um... how did Viktor put it? Oh!: ‘We have to show her that a Being without morals has no right to move freely through this world.’”

“Then... you’re not here for-”

“For Human-adjacent purposes? Certainly not. This Witch business, so stand down... *young lady*.”

Nova

Today was *quite* the busy day in our shop, which made sense because it was a ***particularly*** special day!

What’s so special about today? One might ask.

Well today is the official release of the most important inventory expansion in the long history of Hushpuppy’s Traveling House of Strange and Wonderful and Terrible and Useful Goods! Spearheaded by yours truly - of course - this has been a long time coming! Some of our new additions over the last year were generated on a whim by Hushpuppy, others were the result of significant market research on my part, but today’s addition in particular was the result of close to 15 years of badgering Hushpuppy fairly regularly before she ***finally*** relented.

Can you guess what it was?

...

Blue Glowing Flowers!

How exciting is that?! To have both warm-coloured AND cool-coloured flowers! I don’t mind saying that *this* is going to change the face of Human civilization in a *big* way. I mean... people have been hanging up Pink Glowing Flower all over this continent for almost *two hundred years!* Harvesting the flowers is an important part of my monthly routine, since they grow on our rooftop and all. They sprout, bud, flower, and ultimately begin to glow over the course of the night of the full moon. Thus at the end of the night, I wait up on the roof with Hushpuppy’s Kama and harvest all of the flowers. Then I have to quickly transfer them to pots before sunrise so that they don’t wither. It’s pretty frantic, but once they’ve been potted for a week or two they’ll be good for consumer purchase.

Oftentimes these things will glow for *decades*.

Of course Hushpuppy hates those flowers, she regards them as extremely persistent weeds. Which really is a blessing, since *because* she believes them to be weeds, that also means that she *believes* that they cannot ever be kept from growing on her roof and that they will grow *infinitely*. Over the last 15 or 16 years, I've learned that Hushpuppy's understanding - or misunderstanding, as the case may be - of the world around her has *reality altering* properties, **especially** when it comes to things inside, on, and under her house. No matter how often I remind her that Humans can't see in the dark, she just *cannot* grasp their value.

As you can probably imagine, I made **sales** today. There were people from several cities over that had rolled into town *days* ago just to be one of the first in line. There's been something of an unofficial festival within many of the districts on an almost nightly basis since the word got out. Suffice to say: local business is booming as a result and there is a general buzz of joy in the air that was decidedly NOT here when we first got here.

In fact I don't think we've ever encountered a city more wary of us than this one.

I guess about a year or so ago they had what Hushpuppy affectionately refers to as an 'Evelynn Problem'. She apparently engaged in a series of eye-mutilating serial murders to fuck with someone everyone calls The Eyeball Detective... which is the silliest title I've ever heard but that's besides the point. When I asked Hushpuppy why we were going here, she simply said it was unlikely that Evelynn would backtrack to a town this far out if she played around so audaciously in the past.

It's still worrisome though, isn't it?

I turned about the 'Closed' sign on the outside of the front door for the night and made my way left down the back hallway towards the kitchen to get started on dinner. Hushpuppy was supposed to be bringing back a red wine, so I was going to bake some salmon with some lightly spiced roasted vegetables on the side. Not a super filling meal, but we had a pretty big lunch together already today so I wasn't too worried about it.

Speaking of worries... hasn't Hushpuppy been gone a bit too long?

As if on cue, there was a tap on the front door and Hushpuppy strolled in directly out of a tavern with a bottle of red wine. A nice looking bottle, as a matter of fact.

"That looks nice! I was just finishing up with dinner, come sit down!"

"Oooh smells good!" Nothing makes you feel better about your cooking than Hushpuppy. She manages to make even the simplest of things sound and look delicious based on sheer excitement. I brought over two nicely arranged, full plates of food over to the table then pulled out a small pocket-knife to work open the bottle of wine. While I've had alcohol in the past at various festivals in smaller amounts, this was my first official 'sharing of the bottle' with Hushpuppy, which felt pretty special to me at least.

I popped it open and started to pour but Hushpuppy stopped me with an upraised finger, "Give it... a little time. If you were locked in a bottle for a long time, you'd need to air out too!"

“Er... okay...? So then... What took you so long?”

Hushpuppy frowned slightly, “Was I gone long?”

“A bit long for going into town and picking up a bottle of wine!”

“Oh you know... wandered around a bit, looked into... *things*.” Hmm.

“Get into a fight or something?”

“Not... really? Anyhow, it sure was a nice day out! ” Sus. Incredibly sus but... we’ll let that one go for now. We made small talk for another ten or so minutes while the freshly made food cooled down to a more comfortably edible temperature (for me) and I poured the wine at that point.

“Hang on, Hushpuppy... wasn’t this like, *really* expensive?” This wasn’t the deep dark red that I normally saw Hushpuppy buy. There was a sort of rust-like colour on the edges of the liquid. I once read that the loss of colour was evidence of a red wine’s age, while the gaining of colour was evidence of a white wine’s age.

“It’s fine. We run quite the lucrative business, don’t we? We don’t really have *business expenses* per se... so what’s the harm in splurging on a special sort of day?”

“You know the first bottle is *supposed* to happen on my actual birthday, right?” I enjoyed teasing her about things happening on time, but the fact of the matter is that she actually seems to recognize my birthday whenever it comes around... even if she is just counting down the days until I bake an extravagant cake again.

“Is that so? And here I thought you were technically an adult now. Kinda seems like that was on you right? Nyah!” Hushpuppy shot back before sticking her tongue out at me like the *mature adult* she surely thinks she is.

“Heh, fair enough I suppose! Well... Cheers!” I toasted to myself and Hushpuppy stood up and tapped her glass against mine. We both took large sips and it... was smooth. I didn’t exactly have the vocabulary to describe what I was tasting, but it definitely had more notes to it than any watered down festival fare I’d had up to that point!

“Hmm, I was going to say that maybe this means **you’re** the ‘guardian’ now... but since you take care of the cooking, cleaning, clothing and what not, perhaps you **are** the guardian.”

“Eh... Nah I’d rather **you** have to take *that* sort of responsibility. After all, most of the messes we get involved in tend to be *you* problems that I’m just sort of helping out with. Then again... our sales WERE pretty amazing today and THAT is aallll because of *me*! The student has surpassed the master in mercantilism!”

“Pfft! Bring that *slop* to me when you can make your own Magic items!”

“Oof... Got me there I guess!”

“Well as long as you understand that... drink up, my child! You’ve done well!” With that, we took our glasses out to the storefront area where we tended to hang out if we weren’t actively eating or doing anything else in particular. I hopped up onto the front desk and sat with my feet hanging slightly above the floor while Hushpuppy casually walked up through the air and sat upside down in mid air, somehow never quite spilling a drop of wine. I couldn’t help but smile nostalgically; she used to sit on the ceiling all the time - why she did so was anyone’s guess - but ever since my Library appeared in the house, the ceiling in the storefront got a lot taller too.

Way too tall to have a casual conversation!

There were rather few casual conversations I got to have these days outside of pleasantries in the market. There was a certain wariness that the folks with Shanae have of us that made it kinda difficult to make acquaintance with anyone around my age, probably due to their recent ‘Evelynn problem’. It made me think back to what had happened in Solona when we’d been attacked by that terrifying Magician. I missed the friends I had made and the love I had to leave behind... I mean, I didn’t even know if any of them had made it out of there...

Hushpuppy eyes narrowed as she observed me from her floating, seated position, “What troubles you?”

“Ah... Um. I was just thinking about my friends from back in Solona. I miss them... a lot. It was the first time I really had friends for such a long time. We move around so much, you know? And I know that people for the most part are always going to be wary of me with my Coating like this... I dunno. I’m just sad that there is no way for me to see them.” The wine must have been getting to me for me to be rambling about such things to Hushpuppy of all people.

“Hmm? That’s nonsense. What are you on about?” Hushpuppy barked dismissively.

“What?! Hushpuppy! How could you say something like that?!”

“Because it’s true. You are being *absolutely* ridiculous! Why would you ever bother longing for someone?”

I was starting to get more than a little agitated, “...I... *What?! Are you saying that if we were separated you wouldn’t miss me?*”

“Of course not. If I wanted to see you then I would just walk through the damn door-” She gestured sharply at the front door, “-and come see you.”

“Um, okay but-”

“But what - *exactly* - Nova? Distance has **zero** meaning to us! I honestly thought you’d been visiting the one you liked to smooch the entire past year!”

“...” Oh Nashtav I’m such an idiot.

Hushpuppy’s eyes widened with undisguised amusement, “D-did you *forget* you could do that?! T-t-that’s- So- BWAHAHAHAHA!” She began cackling madly, kicking her feet in the air above

her and clutching her stomach, her mostly empty glass of wine hanging in the air next to her as she found tremendous enjoyment at my expense. I was probably already a bit blushed due to the alcohol, but I could feel the heat rising to my ears from embarrassment.

“...By the Four I’m so *stupid*. Assuming they are all alive... How am I going to even explain the fact that I never checked in with them?!”

“HAHAH-ha... Oh boi. Oh man. Wow. I cannot **wait** to tell the Tea Party about *this*...”

“**Don’t you dare!**” She is so mean sometimes!

“Hehehehe no promises! Anyhow I dunno. Just lie and tell them you needed to be sure that Evelyynn wasn’t waiting for you to do exactly that or something.”

“I guess that’s not a bad idea - in any sense- but... Wait. Didn’t you say that you’d assumed I’d been doing it this whole time?”

“I didn’t say I thought it was a **good idea**, just that I had assumed you were doing it. I don’t make the rules here, Nova.”

“...Don’t you, though?”

“Oh. Right I guess I do! By the way, I’d advise against drinking and Threshold-ing, I don’t think you’re quite **that** skilled at it. Anyhow... another glass?”

“...**Please.**” Hushpuppy smiled as the bottle suddenly appeared above my glass and poured itself. A gesture that - despite my embarrassment - was not lost on me.

I was sitting at the main desk in my Library that was allegedly spatially adjacent to the storefront a few days later. I was going through some mysterious books on my day off to put off the very awkward and terrifying visit I needed to make across the continent to the outskirts of the Solona region soon. Hushpuppy made it sound so easy - just open the door and walk through somewhere. The mechanics of going there weren’t what I was worried about, but Hushpuppy decided that *that* kind of nuance was lost on her when I went to her for more advice.

Thus, I was procrastinating... as one does in these sorts of situations. I had two stacks of books on either side of me on the main desk in the Library. The books on the left side were various **old** looking texts on a variety of topics, from Witches to Elementals to the Outer Planes to the Fae and my personal favourite find: a thick manual titled “Arson: Destruction Well Done”. Each of them were books that I had picked up in various Tea Party Witch’s Domains as per my personal *deals* with said Witches. These texts were normally grouped together on the same set of shelves not due to any commonality of subject matter, author, genre or anything like that. Instead, each of them had a stamp within the front cover that identified them as “Property of The Library”.

The Library of what, though?

I've been rather curious about this for a while now, but couldn't get a straight answer from any of the Witches I'd asked about it. However, the thing I was even more curious about was the stack of books on my right. There were a dozen or so books in this stack and they'd shared a bookcase with the books from the left stack. But the reason that these ones were separated from the other stack was as curious as it was unsettling.

I didn't put those books there.

Like... they just kinda started appearing in that bookcase... in some cases actually seemingly displacing other books on other shelves, which I would find on the floor beneath the shelf. But like... no one except Hushpuppy could walk in here... right? So just how were these books from 'The Library' ending up here if I wasn't bringing them in? And so - as a way of avoiding more immediate problems - I'd been looking for any clues in the text of these... texts.

Suddenly the door flew open and I looked up from my notebook.

"MMMPPHH!!!"

"Ah." Hushpuppy had entered my library and looked very confused. She was dragging some extremely battered-looking guy behind her with one hand by his face.

"So... what you got there?" I asked carefully.

"...A moonlighter."

"...Okay?... Why did you bring him here?"

"**Obviously** I didn't mean to come here! I got the destination wrong, that's all!"

I squinted at her in confusion, "How?!"

"Well I was *probably* thinking about how you might get mad at me for dealing with this problem properly!"

"Hushpuppy, if someone comes at-"

"LET ME-"

"Shaddup!" Hushpuppy snapped with a flick of her wrist followed by a sickening crack as the Moonlighter's life unceremoniously ended.

"HUSHPUPPY!"

"What?!?"

"There is *no* murder in my library!"

"A bit late for that, I think."

"Okay fine! First rule of my library starting from now on: No Murder In The Library!"

Hushpuppy and I both froze in place briefly and we both raised an eyebrow at each other. *Some* kind of Magic just happened when I said that, but neither of us knew what it was or why it happened. After a few seconds of awkward silence she reached down and picked up the corpse; slinging it over her shoulder.

"In my defense, I was just taking care of a problem for a friend of mine." Hushpuppy pouted petulantly.

"Taking care of- Wait. **What?!**" In the last fifteen-ish years I'd been with Hushpuppy, I don't think I ever once heard her refer to **anyone** as her 'friend'.

"So this moonlighter was all up in my friend's territory making all sorts of ruckus like, 'Oh she's gonna eat all of you!' and 'You are all complicit in her horrors' etcetera etcetera. Real rude stuff. Now she's a Witch but she's a bit of a spidery sort of lady so she's SUPER shy about interacting with people. So she pulled some strings and got a message out to me and asked for my help!" There's... way too much to unpack here, wow.

"...Who's your *friend*? I didn't know you even had friends!"

"**Of course I have friends!** I have friends for *days*, Nova."

"Friends for days? What could that possibly-"

"*Friends for days*. Anyhow I'm quite a bit offended that you don't think I have any friends, so since you're off today, we'll close shop and you're gonna come with me to meet her!"

"Wait but-"

Hushpuppy

We stepped through the Threshold and ended up coming out of a small cabin just outside of The Weaver's territory. By stepped I of course mean that - after tossing that Moonlighter's corpse into The Slaughter House - I kinda chucked Nova through this door in a hurry. She was acting all offended even though she easily landed on her feet.

"**ACK!** Why are there so many spiders!? Also don't you throw me through a door ever again!" A few dozen tiny spiderlings scattered from around the clearing as Nova had landed.

"Obviously they lived here! And *you* don't get to be offended right now! You assumed I didn't have friends!"

Nova stamped her foot indignantly, "Yeah that's 'cause you've only ever referred to entities at large as: colleagues, customers, Moonlighters, Witch Hunters, or *food!*"

"Eh, moving on-"

“-No!-”

“MOVING ON! There are a few things you gotta know about T’Avi. So like I said she’s a Witch, she’s got certain... arachnid-qualities and she’s *very* sensitive about them. So just be a nice polite lady like you always are and *don’t point anything strange out!* ‘Kay?” Nova does so like to comment on things, so it’s very important to establish these kinds of ground rules ahead of time.

“Of course I wouldn’t be shitty like that! C’mon Hushpuppy!”

“Sure sure. Now come, we’ve got a bit of walking to do.”

Nova sighed behind me, “Kaaay~.”

The edge of the woods weren’t far from the cabin which we exited. It was a great day for walking, which is to say that the sky was super gloomy and overcast, but not even a tiny, distant whiff of precipitation. We walked down the hill that marked the edge of the forest and the beginning of the valley within which the surprisingly large village of Cañarra was nestled. As we descended, I could barely make out a slight distortion above the valley. Normally - if you’re looking for them - it’s not hard to spot The Weaver’s strings, but on a silvery day like this they were nearly imperceptible. Or at least they must be, since Nova hadn’t pointed them out loudly yet, which would simplify things.

One thing to explain at a time!

We entered the Cañarra and the totally inconspicuously well-dressed townsfolk greeted us pleasantly enough.

“Oh! Hushpuppy! Rare to see you here again so soon! Who’s this?” Some guy asked while gesturing at Nova.

“This is the child I mentioned... a while ago?”

“Hmm... Ah! Yes, your *daughter!* She’s older than I thought she’d be... then again, it’s probably even harder for **you** to keep track of a child’s growth than it is for us! Hahaha!” Oh no...

“Her *daughter?* Why *yes I am!*~.” UGH. She gets so *smug* about this topic. Nova moved herself right next to me and hooked my arm with her own. I could *feel* her gaze boring through the side of my head.

““ ...””

“We are **not** doing this right now, Nova.”

“Heeheehee!~ Sir I’ll be back a little bit later to hear all the stories that Hushpuppy has been telling about me!”

“*Ugh*... Anyhow, just here to see T’Avi again so that this one will stop making so many assumptions about how I spend my time!”

“Is that so? Well, enjoy!”

“Oh by the Four let it go already!”

“Yep.” I swept by the man whose name I could not recall, slower than intended since Nova still insisted on doing this little bit with our arms locked.

“So like... Everyone here is extremely well dressed. But the architecture doesn’t look *that* wealthy. What’s the deal?” She was looking around at the various folk who were milling about, but not paying us too much mind other than cursory greetings.

“Good eye. My friend works here as a tailor of no small renown. She’s known as The Weaver for just this reason and *no other reason*.”

“And what? Does she just *give away* her exquisite silk clothing? That doesn’t sound sustainable.” Nova was just full of critique today.

“Do recall that she’s a Witch, child. She has almost as little overhead and upfront costs as I do with the things that I make.”

“Sure, but don’t **you** charge a crap-ton for our wares?”

“Well **my** Magic items are *useful* for more than just covering up!”

“Pfft! Okay, Hushpuppy.” She scoffed, giggled, and squeezed my arm.

“Are you done with this-” I gestured with my head at the improvised arm hold she had me in, “-you strange child?”

“*Nope!* I’m suddenly in a good mood, so let me indulge a bit.” And now she’s all smiles. Humans change too fast for me to ever keep up. Eh, whatever.

I sighed in resignation, “Fiiiiine. Only until we get to T’Avi’s place, though.”

“Alright, we’re here.” Nova disengaged her armbar or whatever that maneuver is called and fell a step or two behind. T’Avi’s *house* was fairly modest in appearance - not unlike mine from the outside - it wasn’t terribly large and generally appeared to be made of some dark, wood-like material.

More or less true, I suppose.

As we got close to the door, it slowly creaked open towards us. It would be disingenuous for me to claim to be surprised by this. While this mountain valley village wasn’t her Domain in the technical sense, it was certainly her *territory*. Simply put: you **cannot** sneak up on The Weaver.

Believe me, I’ve *tried*.

We stepped inside of The Weaver's house and I felt the 'rules' change as we transitioned from the outside into her Domain. The primary 'rule' of her Domain was pretty much the opposite of my own. With my Domain, you *must* knock and you *cannot* enter without permission from Nova or myself. The invitation itself can be implicit, such as one of us leaving the door opened or unlocked, or direct like when we say 'come in' or 'welcome'. If you don't have permission, don't knock, etcetera... then the Domain redirects the door to an outlet of my choosing... which just so happens to be the *Wrong Place* known as The Sepulcher.

For T'Avi, the primary rule is quite simple: you cannot *leave* her Domain without permission.

Noooooot that I was particularly worried about *that* little rule with *this* particular Witch.

"Oh! Um- Hi, er. Hushpuppy! This is so *nice*! Um... to have you back so *quickly*! Oh! This one... she sme- I mean, er- She... must be- um, your **daughter**, then?" T'Avi - a *completely normal looking* humanoid Witch - gave her usual stammering response: an unfortunate side effect of her crippling shyness.

"Hey there T'Avi! Yes, I had a point to make today since *this* one-" I gave Nova a hard smack on the back and pushed her forward in between myself and T'Avi,"-didn't believe that I had any *friends*! She is called Nova, by the way."

"What!? How silly!" T'Avi bent down smoothly and inconspicuously, reaching out a hand to clasp wrists with Nova, who had an appropriate - if not intentionally - completely unreadable expression on her face. Regardless, she clasped wrists with the extremely average and not at all suspicious figure that loomed above both of us, "Now- er. Nice to -um, **meet you!** For the First Time! Even! Yes! Hushpuppy is such a- er, *nice* lady! She helps me with corp- er, uh...making problems... go away! Yes! Problem solving!" Nice T'Avi, *nailed it*.

She's an okay actress, I guess.

Nova blinked several times in rapid succession, "...S-sure... You... have a lovely... house?"

"*You really think so?!*" Nova flinched backwards slightly at the sudden excitement the sp- *Witch* displayed at having her Domain complimented.

"Yeeeeeah. The... wood colouring is... nice? And I like your tapestries. Did you weave them yourself?" Man, I raised such a polite Human. Even *I'm* surprised!

"**Weave?** Oh. Yes! *The Weaver!* That's what... hehe... *everyone* calls me. Um, you know... because I'm- uh, *such* a good... Tailor! Yes! I weave and I tail many things!"

"Yup she sure does! Speaking of which, you see the outfits we're wearing, T'Avi?"

"Oh. Um. Yes! They are... *cute?* And of... um... *passable quality?*"

"Indeed they are. But don't you think *you* could do better?"

“**YES!**” Hah. Got her! T’Avi really can’t stand it when people in her territory aren’t nicely dressed. That’s a huge part of the reason why she barely charges the Humans living in her territory anything for her clothes.

I nodded approvingly, “I figured. After all... *Nova* was commenting earlier on how nice the clothes everyone around here was wearing looked! Right, *Nova*?”

“...”

“*Nova*?”

“Ah. My bad, sorry. I was just lost in thought. Um... Yes! Everyone looks lovely!”

“I heard- er. I mean... *Truly?! I- uh... Feel* blessed? Yes! **Blessed** to hear you say that!” Ah good. This was going well and *Nova* seems to be taking all of this rather well!

Nova

...

...

...

...

Oh right.

Sorry, zoned out for a bit there...

So...

Well... I mean...

No matter how I look at it...

That’s just a **giant spider** wearing a dress, right? Like... a couch-sized **spider**.

Can spiders become Witches?!

Or *was* this a *totally Human* Witch originally... and they turned into a spider? A **gargantuan** spider?!

The latter is definitely concerning. But actually the former might be **more** concerning?!

I guess the only thing you need to do to become the hybrid entity known as a Witch is eat a Fae alive...

It’s reasonably rare - not like... **super** rare - but rare. It’s SUPPOSED to be difficult...

How in the 13 Planes does a *spider* catch and eat a Fae?!

...

I have so many questions. Existential questions, mostly. Considering I *thought* I basically understood how at the very least *Witches* worked... but I guess not?

But first and foremost: How is she so... *bad* at this?!

It- She's... *clearly and obviously* working a marionette from beneath that dress. The life-sized marionette is certainly well made, but was obviously a doll. It is *very* impressive that it is moving so many different parts of this marionette, for sure. But still... definitely a doll. A doll that I just shook hands with as she admonished me for - justifiably - not thinking Hushpuppy had any friends.

Glancing down at the wrist I was clasping - the extremely artificial-feeling wrist - I could **see** the bottom of its... arachnid leg *just* poking out of the bottom of her incredibly poofy dress.

I guess the ventriloquism on display was pretty impressive?

But if you're trying to hide your identity... please do a better job!

Whatever this... 'Witch' is, I can for sure say what it is not: a 'person with certain arachnid-qualities'. This is a giant spider that is doing a **terrible** job of hiding the fact that it's a *giant spider*.

Which brings me to my second most important question:

WHY IS SHE SO HONESTLY EMBARRASSED?!

I mean-

"How goes your surveillance of Evelynn Vandree?" !?!!?

"Wait **what**?!" The casual mention of Evelynn snapped me out of my existential musings on the nature of Witchhood.

"What? Oh crap did I not tell you?" Hushpuppy scratched the top of her head as if she were trying to physically summon the memory of doing something she *definitely hadn't done!!!*

"It seems not!"

"Oh. Well, T'Avi here has been using a... special combination of... er... 'Magic' and... 'Magic Items' to generally keep track of Evelynn's movements. More or less." That was an excessively suspiciously put together sentence, Hushpuppy. And the exaggerated winking and air quotes she was making with her fingers did *not* help her case.

"" ..."

"Oh come on Nova don't do this *now*." There is *no* way I'm in the wrong in this situation.

“Well- um. Maybe- Hushpuppy. I can? **Explain?**” A rapid, mandibular clicking noise escaped from beneath T’Avi’s dress as the upper torso of the marionette rotated its body strangely to bring its head down to eye level and uncomfortably close to my own, “You see... um... I use certain... *Magic?* To connect with various little... *Critters* using an... Intermediate in the form of a web- er... Silk! Silk...-”

“Scarves!” Hushpuppy piped with a comparatively absurd level of confidence.

“...Okay... Glossing over- well, *all of that*. I appreciate that you’ve *apparently* been helping us out tremendously. But... you aren’t in any danger are you, T’Avi? I don’t think I’d feel comfortable asking you to risk yourself on our behalf.” The marionette creaked its head at an unnatural angle, flickering through a number of approximations of various emotional states before returning its body to its original upright position.

“What a... um... *silly* question... young Nova. We’re **all** in danger, you know? But- ah, with my... Insight Magic... we can be in a little... *less* danger. We all need to **help**... Each other! After all... if this is- um, well... anything like that *Stuffed Cat Incident*, w-we won’t want to be caught off guard!

“Wait, why does **she** know about that too?!” The amount of shit I’ve received from Witches over that thing that happened *one time* is freakin’ unbelievable!

“Well-” Hushpuppy began with a shit-eating grin on her face.

“-BUT that’s not important right now!” T’Avi interrupted her sharply, “Little Nova... I hear you... CLEAN! Yes, you *clean!* Correct?”

...Oh dammit.

T’Avi took Hushpuppy and I’s measurements before allowing us to leave her nest-house-Domain-thing and - after a brief round of goodbyes - we stepped back into our home. I jogged ahead of Hushpuppy and sat down on the front desk to face her. She stopped just a couple meters away and regarded me with an arched eyebrow.

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“...That’s a surprise. What for?”

“For taking the threat that Evelynn poses seriously.”

“I take most things se-”

“-*You do not.*”

“Eh, worth a try.”

"Now that we're here, explain this... power of her's."

"Well Magic is involved, the 'critters' are spiders and the 'scarves' are a big web that she sits on that feeds her all sorts of information. She really does act in mysterious ways! Pretty cool, huh?"

"I... don't know if you've ever given me such a straight answer that still managed to tell me next to nothing... I don't understand. How can you be so certain that her Insight is correct?"

"It hasn't failed us over the last year, has it?"

"Sure... I guess? But that's a lot of faith to place into *anyone*, let alone an entity who acts in - as you put it - *mysterious ways*!"

"Ugh. *Nova*. You're doing that **thing** again!"

"Thing? What **thing**?!"

"That **thing** where you demand that every little thing be put in *Human* terms. I legitimately do not think that our language has words to conceptualize what it is that The Weaver does. The best I can do is this: it's Magic in *principle*, but Arachnid in *execution*. Make sense?"

"...**No**!"

Hushpuppy just groaned at me again and shook her head, "Look, *Nova*. Over half of your extended social circle is made up of immortals and Fae-adjacent creatures." She turned to face me and allowed her typically bored gaze to soften somewhat, "Try looking at things from our perspective every once and awhile and recall that you don't *have* to understand everything to trust that I'm doing *everything* I can to deal with the Evelyynn problem."

Gah. What am I supposed to say when she looks at me so earnestly and talks about trust like that, "...I'll try my best."

"Thhhhhank you very much, child. Now that *that* is over with, let's get some food, shall we?"

I squelched another sigh and decided that today, I would just roll with it, "Sure, Hushpuppy."

Chapter 2: Lost and Found

Hushpuppy

There was a knock on the backdoor today.

Well, **a** backdoor, as the case may be.

As freakin' usual it was during dinner time - it's like people don't know that *other* times exist - and Nova and I were having a simply *lovely* spicy noodle dish with pork and some veggies. Good times all around and no complaints about the meal itself. If I recall correctly, we were talking about something pretty important... to Nova - that is - not really all that important to me.

"...I mean... They were all pretty rightfully *furious* with me."

"Uh-huh." I guess she finally stopped beating around the bush with checking in on those little friends of hers from a while back.

"But at least they survived! You know? That was good enough for me to know, even if I can't ever be in their lives in the same way again... People I guess drift apart, you know?"

"Ugh Nova that's so *dumb!*"

"Excuse me?!"

"If you **want** to be in these kids' lives and you have all the power to make it so then you should just *make it so!*" This is the problem with smart Humans: they always overthink things!

"Hushpuppy, that's not how relationships work. For one thi-"

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Both our heads whipped around towards the kitchen's entrance. Hearing a knock wasn't necessarily weird, but the echo on this one sounded weird.

"Hushpuppy... Do we have a back door?" Nova asked me quietly, also noticing that those knocks sounded weird. I sighed wearily and got up to investigate with Nova following close behind.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

...

Yeah that's definitely coming from *my room*.

Rude.

I stalked up to the door and opened it myself, not fussing too much about any dangers that might be waiting on the other side.

"What are you selling I don't want i- Eh? **Calliope?!**" Of the Eight remaining Tea Party Witches, Calliope was the 5th oldest - I think she had a century or two on me - and specialized in... something or another. Honestly I can't remember. I think the most standout thing about her is that she was the most Human-looking member aside from myself. Meverastethin notwithstanding, them being a Fek'thal and all. Behind her was *The Wrong Hallway*, with it's stuffy air, sourceless lights in the upper corners of the ceiling and wall, and of course the writhing, clasped hands that made up the floor.

“Yes yes A Witch Called Hushpuppy. Tea Party. *Now.*” ???

“Now? Like *Now-Now?*”

“Yes ***Now-Now!*** And bring Nova!” How brusque.

I turned to Nova and shrugged, “Well, you heard her. We’ll be right there so close that Threshold before I do it myself.” Calliope *could* have used the front door and I did *not* like her trying to flex like that with **my** Domain. She clicked her tongue and shut the door that I’d opened. Nova rushed off to her room to change her clothes into the usual Tea Party fare and I entered my room for real. I looked at myself in the mirror and allowed my robe to unravel itself as the Tea Party attire that Nova had picked out for me so many years ago flew out from the closet.

I wonder what this is about? Was I in trouble, perhaps? Maybe I should bring more gravitas, then, just in case. I waved my hand and the skirt became the texture of a living raven while my hat took on a fresh sheen. The little sleeveless black top with gold trim took on the texture of a snake’s scales and I nodded approvingly at myself in the mirror. This outfit seemed plenty intimidating and I bet even Nova will think I’m pretty cool-looking!

Nova met me by the front door and looked me up and down a couple of times and nodded. Hah! She took my hand as I pulled out my door charm for *The Wrong Hallway*; a palm-sized, rigid, shiny white card made of some unknown material. I found this artifact on the other side over a century ago when I first stumbled upon *The Wrong Hallways* and it tended to come in handy for maintaining a stable Threshold to the place with no mental or Magical effort on my part.

“Ready?” I asked my charge who stood next to me and frustratingly a little taller than me.

“As I’ll ever be. You’re sure you have no idea what this is about?”

“Not a clue!” I said as I tapped on the front door and opened the Threshold.

Nova

I don’t think I’ll ever fully get used to being The Human at the Table.

We entered *The Eye of the Storm* at ground level. As far as *Wrong Places* went, this one was - in a way - quite the extravagant place to meet: a spatially locked pavilion with a large round table in the center and a kitchen that was only there when Viktor wanted it to be. Far, far down below there was a field of wheat-like stalks that appeared to grow Human hair instead of grain. Despite the massive storm surrounding the several dozen kilometers across Eye... there was only ever a slight hum of wind and shifting grain-stalks that could be heard from the pavilion.

As soon as we entered - as usual - Meverastethin impatiently teleported us up to the floating pavilion high up above the field below. At the start of any given Witch’s Tea Party meeting, greetings are exchanged rather flippantly as Hushpuppy sits down and I maintain my initial

position one step behind and to the left of her chair. Then - normally - I am greeted far more politely than Hushpuppy is by all present entities and I return said greetings.

Today was a little bit different.

“Yes, very good. *Everyone* is here. A Chore Girl Called Nova, if you would?” Meverastethin spoke in a measured, languid sort of way that came across as aristocratic to me. They lazily waved a hand and the kitchen I normally use here appeared in its entirety. As I understood it, this entire setup existed *somewhere* in the hollowed-out mountain that they called home somewhere in Sol’balim. The kitchen was exactly as I’d left it last time I had used it and I had made sure to stock it up quite well. I lit the flames I would need to make everyone’s preferred brew and set out several mugs.

This part has never stopped being nerve-wracking for me. I thought they would all start this meeting immediately since it seemed so serious, but instead they did the usual thing of simply all **watching** me make tea in absolute silence. Mercifully, there was the slight white noise of the maelstrom swirling around outside of the pavilion. I had this entire process down to a science - thankfully - as I staggered the brewing and steeping of each Witch’s tea in the order that they would be served, which was in descending order of age.

I carried the first mug over to the Fek’tal Witch, Meverastethin, who accepted it with a slight nod. They were some number of years over 1000 and the oldest by a - to me - significant margin. I would normally refer to them as ‘ancient’, but that apparently held rather specific connotations that no one had bothered clueing me into yet. They were a grey-furred, Fox-type Fek’tal and had managed to maintain their *Substance* impressively well despite the sheer amount of Fae they’d consumed over the last millenia. I had to wonder if Meverastethin knew something about maintaining their form that the other Witches didn’t... or perhaps it was just because Fek’tal have *that* much stronger *Substance* than Humans.

Viktor the Shadow Witch was the second oldest, sitting somewhere in the 700 to 800 range. He existed as a pile of shadows that occasionally had mouths and eyes and other features... but never for very long and certainly never consistently. To me it was a wonder that 1) he was still alive and 2) he was still able to catch and devour Fae with such collapsed *Substance*. All I knew is that he only ever had a given physical feature for as long as he needed it before it would collapse back into the writhing mass that made up his body. Then again, Shadow Magic is basically a complete mystery to me and is apparently ‘mechanically related’ to the Spatial Magic that Meverastethin specializes in, although - again - no one has ever given me a straight answer on the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of that relationship.

I would - under different circumstances - refer to the Witch known as Felicity as ‘unfortunate’, but she was typically the most bubbly of the Tea Party Witches. Felicity resembled a severely malnourished woman with bronze skin, but most of her was... um... goopy? Her earlobes, the skin of her elbows, sometimes her nose, and random other parts of her from time to time had the consistency of mud. Parts of her would droop up to a meter at times and occasionally slough off completely, eventually crawling back towards and being absorbed into her body by way of her tremendous *Soul*. Magically-speaking, she was a strange Witch in that she specialized in

Magically manipulating Bones and actually had no interest in me using my *Dust Bunny* Ability. Rather, she preferred I served in a sort of Head Maid capacity managing her multitudes of skeletal servants to work efficiently in the cleaning of her Domain.

The 'middle children' of the group (I would never call them that out loud) were Selim and Calliope, both Human Witches in their early 500s, within a decade of each other. I think Selim is the older one. They could often be found in the same general vicinity, bickering with each other for one reason or another... I'm *pretty* sure they are romantically involved in *some* capacity or another. Of the Human-derived Witches, Calliope was the most outwardly Human-looking of the group, with no obvious physical alterations aside from the black sclera surrounding the yellow irises of her eyes. She had a light, caramel complexion and long, fluffy, bright pink hair and could typically be found lounging about in a silk robe and trying to pick a fight with Hushpuppy for... *some* reason. To this day, neither of them has given me *any* explanation on why exactly she is so dead set on trying to stay on Hushpuppy's bad side.

Selim on the other hand can only be described as 'reptilian'. Unlike T'Avi who was *definitely* a giant spider and not simply in possession of 'arachnid-like qualities', Selim could be properly described as having many reptile-like qualities. Selim snow-white skin for the most part, but she also had pretty, black, iridescent scales covering her extremities, as well as a slightly elongated face and a much longer tongue than normal. She kept her hair short, which made sense considering that said hair was completely colourless and transparent. Her sharp, clawed hands were always surprisingly gentle when accepting a mug of tea from me or patting my head as a gesture of praise. She kinda reminded me of the stories of the Dragons of old; few details remain about them, but apparently the last of them decided they were done with this planet and went to Space... or something to that effect.

There are a couple of empty chairs at the table for Witches I've never met. Devili and Harenous were both murdered in cold blood by Evelynn at some point between Hushpuppy and I meeting and my first Tea Party. I always found this more than a little concerning, as it had been my assumption that Tea Party Witches were all uniformly on another level from your average Witch. Harenous had been the next youngest after Hushpuppy and Devili had been between Calliope and Orchid, but that was pretty much all I knew about them.

On the subject of Orchid... they were in their late 300s and I think of everyone they probably frightened me the most. Instead of eyeballs, they had two blooming flowers growing out of the sockets. The pistils extending out of the center of either flower twitched as they somehow took in visual information. Most of their joints seemed to have been replaced with wood of some kind and their suspiciously Human-looking hair had vines wrapped up in it. Whether the vines were growing out of their skull or were simply decorative was known only to them. To top all of *that* off... I don't think they've ever *once* used Magic in front of me, so I couldn't even begin to guess at their specialty.

Today's meeting was actually my first time meeting Malice, who was on the lower end of 300 and thus only had a couple of decades on Hushpuppy. If Selim could be described as snow-white, then Malice was definitely charcoal-black. From her skin to her hair to her eyes to the inside of her mouth and teeth, to gaze upon her form was like being in *The Slaughter House*

without a light source. You could almost be forgiven for mistaking her for a shadow when she was standing still. Her Magic specialty seemed to involve the manipulation of Light; not its brightness or magnitude, but its density. I always thought her Domain was pretty neat with its crisscrossing light bridges within what appeared to be a large glass sphere beneath the sea. Her and Hushpuppy seemed to get along well enough, but the traveling Hushpuppy and reclusive Malice who couldn't always be bothered to even attend these Tea Parties certainly didn't go out of their way to interact.

Once everyone was properly served, I engaged in easily the most recent and unsettling addition to my Tea Party routine: I sat down in a *chair* at the table in-between Hushpuppy and Selim. I received some slight acknowledgement across a spectrum of emotions from the various Witches at the table, however any annoyance that might be bubbling beneath the surface in Calliope or Malice were held in check by the tacit approval of Meverastethin, Viktor, and Felicity. After a few moments, everyone but Viktor turned towards Meverastethin with varying levels of confusion. The question of *why* this meeting was happening hung unspoken in white noise of the storm outside of the pavilion.

"Now that Tea is served and we have The Human at the Table seated... *Hushpuppy*."
Meverastethin

"Hmm?" Hushpuppy was sitting cross-legged in her chair, her tea mug floating in the air half an arm's length away from her face. I wish she would at least pretend to look like she was interested in this - well, *any* - meeting with her senior colleagues.

"Where are the ashes of the Ancient Witch Kaz'bek?" ???

"...In *The Slaughter House*?" Hushpuppy answered slowly, baffled by the question that everyone knew the answer to.

"No. They are not. I was in there today and the Ancient Witch was *not* there. Viktor has already been inside to confirm."

"Okay... So why ask me, then?"

"The Ancient Witch cannot use Magic anymore, while you are constantly opening doors to and from *The Slaughter House*."

"And?! You all go there too!"

"Granted - *young Witch* - we all go there from time to time. And then we come back to our Domains; that much should be obvious to you. Tell me, all present," Meverastethin raised their voice as they addressed the whole table, "Has anyone perchance stumbled upon the sentient ashes of an Ancient Witch recently and deigned not to report it?" There was a general negative murmur as everyone turned their heads towards Hushpuppy and I.

"You ,on the other hand," Meverastethin continued to stare down Hushpuppy, "Frequently open Thresholds not just to *The Slaughter House* and back, but as I understand it... you have a

tendency to go not only to these *Wrong Places* and back, but between *Wrong Places* as well, no?" Wait... why would she do that?

"Eh... Infrequently."

"And these doors shut behind you?"

"...Yes?" Yikes. There was dead silence as Hushpuppy's lack of confidence in the matter permeated the table. Everyone with discernable expressions presented neutrally, with the exception of Calliope, who had something of a smug smirk on her face from seeing Hushpuppy in the hot seat.

"So then... taking it as a given that Kaz'bek actually just up and *left*... So what? Good on them for pulling themselves together long enough to get out of there. What *exactly* is the problem here?" Hushpuppy leaned back in her chair, musing out loud a question that had been on my mind as well.

Meverastethin ran both of their hands up their vulpine snout and over the ears atop their head before sighing loudly, "A Witch Called Hushpuppy... You do understand why Kaz'bek was a pile of ashes in *The Slaughter House*, no?"

"...Yeah duh. She tried to steal Fire as a concept blah blah pissed off The God of Fire yadda yadda got smote and kicked out of... reality? I guess?"

"A crude summary, but not inaccurate. So... Hushpuppy. With all the time you've spent around Nova, doubtless you are smarter than you used to be," I flinched at the unexpected compliment from the single most powerful entity that I was currently aware of, "If that which Tyrsell *banished* from existence were to appear again, to consume within a territory within His purview, or - in the worst case - unleash multiple millenia worth of rage from their imprisonment... Just what do you think will happen to the Witches who were even tangentially involved in Kaz'bek's release?" Oh.

Ooooooh shi-

"Hmm. I guess there could be Fire in our futures as well."

"Indeed."

"But I mean is this *really* solely *my* responsibility?"

"Of course it is!" Felicity interjected in an inappropriately bubbly voice and a slight clap of her hands that sounded like two wet towels smacking together.

"*Is it*, though?"

"""""" ... """""""""" Everyone - myself included - just gawked at Hushpuppy's impertinence.

""""""""YES!"""""""" Every Witch at the table shouted in concert at Hushpuppy after that brief pause.

"Ugh. *Fine*. I'll retrace my damn steps!"

Meverastethin nodded gravely, "Good. Bring Nova with you."

"Uh... Why though?"

"How exactly do you intend to wrangle *ashes* by yourself? Nova's attendance at this meeting was arguably more important than your own." Meverastethin chided Hushpuppy and both Calliope and Selim snorted in amusement, "Nova. I trust you understand your role in all of this?"

"Of course, Meverastethin. I will give it my all."

"Perfect. Complete this task promptly," Meverastethin drew some sort of symbol in the air in the blink of an eye with one finger, palmed it, and a small stone flew towards me with a symbol I've seen in many places within their Domain, "Use that to call a Meeting when you've located The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek. If this is anything like that *Stuffed Cat Incident*, you will not want to be caught without a method of contact." ***Oh for fuck's sake!***

"Why- Ugh. Yes, Meverastethin." I affirmed, resigning myself to the fact that apparently *everyone* knew about **that**.

"Hushpuppy, guide and protect Nova until she can contain the Ancient Witch's *Substance*."

"...As if I'd do anything else."

Hushpuppy

We stepped back into the storefront and Nova B-lined for the back hallway, turning right towards her library, presumably to search for information on our new quarry. I made a stop in the kitchen first to grab some bread and cheese to snack on before joining her. She once explained to me that she had some fancy way of organizing texts so she could always find what she was looking for no matter what... which kinda seemed like it was a PsyEn Ability but she insisted it wasn't. It was this alleged 'method' that had her specifically focused on one shelf with her back turned to me.

"Alright so... this is *bad*, right?" Nova fretted whilst keeping her focus on the book shelf, all questions as ever.

"Eh... potentially? It is a very certain thing that the ashes of The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek resided in *The Slaughter House*. They've been there since I first stumbled upon the tower a couple hundred years ago. How long they'd been there since before I found them is any Witch's guess. But considering you can't exit without Threshold Magic-"

"-As far as you know." Nova cut me off and glanced over her shoulder at me.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that ourselves and the other Witches enter and leave the Slaughter House and other *Wrong Places* via Threshold Magic... but how certain are we that *every* person you've left there

over the last couple hundred years starved to death there or are eaten by the other Tea Party members?” Nova was pulling various choice texts off of the shelf as she provided her explanation.

“...I suppose I have never stayed there long enough to ensure anything.” I had no choice to concede... not that I had any particular reason to argue with her at this point.

“Exactly... so we don’t actually know that it is *impossible* to get out of there without Magic. So I guess my next question is a two parter.”

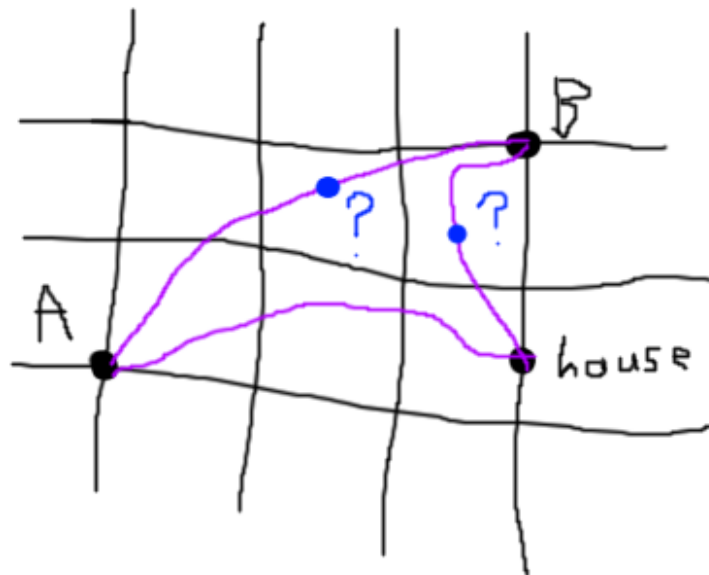
“Shoot.” As she’s gotten older, her questions have become much smarter. Must be all that reading she’s been doing.

“**Where** exactly are Wrong Places?”

“They aren’t anywhere, duh. That’s kinda what makes them *Wrong* in the first place.”

“Sure. But you’ve never actually elaborated on that and I’ve never really pushed the point before.” She wasn’t even looking at me as she spoke, instead choosing to leaf through the texts she’d removed from the shelf as she sat on the ground and leaned against the shelf, “So tell me - according to you - *where* is ‘anywhere’. If Wrong Places aren’t ‘anywhere’, then what do you consider ‘anywhere’.”

“Oof. *That* is a question. Um... here!” I snagged some paper and a readied quill from elsewhere in our home. Nova waited patiently as I scribbled out a basic diagram-type thingy:



“See!” I presented my picture triumphantly, knowing that it was a perfectly clear and legible explanation. Nova looked up from her books at me.

“...”

“What?”

“This doesn’t mean *anything* on its own. Please explain.” Uuggghhhh.

“Okay so like, point A and point B and our house are on the lines and therefore are places, you see?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And when we use Threshold Magic, we travel along the purple lines!”

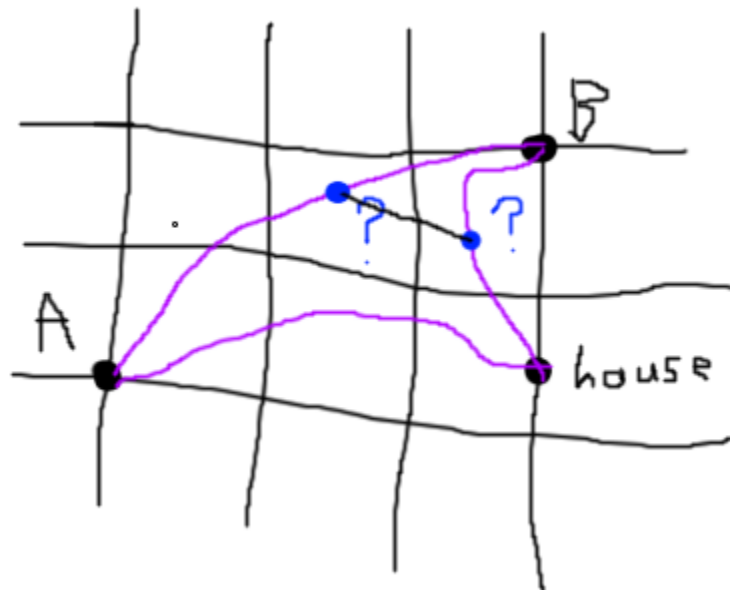
“...Yuuup...”

“And the Blue points are the *Wrong Places*. They aren’t on any lines so you can’t just get there normally... But sometimes when you open a Threshold... randomly you’ll accidentally intersect with a place that isn’t anywhere. That’s how I’ve found all of these *Wrong Places* over time: sometimes I just spend a day or something opening and closing Thresholds to various places and - on very rare occasions - the door will open somewhere *Wrong*.”

Nova nodded in understanding, “...I see. Thus they are *Wrong Places* not only in the fact that they *feel* wrong, but in that the door you opened did not go to the *correct* target destination.”

“Exactly.”

“So...” Nova got up off the ground and Magic’d a pen into her own hand, drawing a single line across my art piece:



“Are *Wrong Places* connected?” Nova asked as I turned to look at the line she drew between the blue points.

“...I suppose that makes sense, in so far as nonsense places could make sense.”

“Yeah... still though... *The Slaughter House* is like *The Sepulcher*, right? There is *no* non-Magical inlet or outlet as far as I’ve seen.”

“Yes... but as was discussed earlier... I’ve opened doors from *The Slaughter House* to other *Wrong Places* in the past. And we don’t know how long those *actually* took to close. So perhaps we should check those places first.”

“It would definitely be **way** more convenient if they didn’t make it out into Sol’balim... I just wish we knew how long they’d been gone... we **are** sure that they left and aren’t just hiding, right?”

“Ehhh... We can *check* if you want. But Meverastethin says they aren’t there and Viktor double-checked... So I’m more than happy to assume they were thorough in their search.”

“Fair. Fair. So what do we need?” Asking the *real* questions, finally!

“Comfy shoes, your Ability, my Magic, and like... 10 sandwiches... and cold tea!”

Nova grabbed a couple more books off the shelf and sat back down, “Cool. Let me finish going through these and I’ll get our *interdimensional picnic basket* packed tomorrow.”

“Yessss!” ***That’s*** what I wanted to hear!

While she was consulting books that would likely tell her nothing, I decided to do my part. After changing back into my usual shopkeeping outfit, I opened a Threshold rather rudely right near T’Avi the Weaver’s house. As soon as I stepped through the Threshold I saw her own door open slightly, welcoming me in. If nothing else, I don’t think I liked how she always *immediately* knew that I was here. I pushed it open and it shut silently behind me.

“This is... three! Three times in *rapid-* um, succession! That you’ve visited me, Hushpuppy!” A perfectly passable marionette in a dress - that definitely didn’t hide an entire spider underneath - descended from the ceiling and bowed slightly before turning its face towards me and audibly creaking out a smile.

“It’s just me this time, T’Avi. Relax.”

“Ah! I-is that so? So it is... *Delightful.*” She took a few deep breaths to calm down - which always helped our conversations move faster - then let her voice pitch down from its usual breathy, sing-song tone, “Three times, though. *Junius.*”

“***Can you not?***” Pretending to be a know-it-all when she almost certainly heard Evelynn utter my name last year, “...And yeah... Some things have come up...” Glossing over her phenomenally rude usage of my true name, I proceeded to summarize the content of the Tea Party meeting. If this Ancient Witch did indeed get out into Sol’balim, the only one with the reach and knowledge to pinpoint their location would be T’Avi.

The marionette struck a pensive pose for a bit before musing aloud, “So in the end... nothing changes about my role in our deal? Just keeping an eye out for two entities, instead of just one, correct?”

“Pretty much. As with the other one... don’t try to make contact. Just let me know. I understand you value your territory’s *peace*?”

“Very much so! I will consume all things that threaten that peace. Anything else? Oh! Actually... I will have you and your *daughter*’s clothes completed... soon? Soon.” I rolled my eyes at the emphasis she placed on the word ‘daughter’. I was never going to hear the end of this.

Nova

*Whatever you wear that is the most **you**... wear that thing.*

That’s what Hushpuppy said when she woke me up late the next morning. As far as I was concerned... I didn’t really have a particular *style*. I always liked blending in with the populace of whatever city or village we happened to be interacting with at any given point. So I decided to just go with my work ‘uniform’: a black vest with gold trim and a long, black, pleated skirt with pockets. I activated my Ability to gather up a small amount of dust to put into my skirt’s pockets ‘cause... Well, you never know when you might need pocket dust.

I had been up for the better part of the night trying to brush up on various mythologies surrounding The Ancient Witch Kaz’bek and get *some* realistic idea of what we might be dealing with here. I had several texts by Human scholars that had varying amounts of detail on the topic and unfortunately rather... conflicting notions. There was a bit too much projection of Human cultural values onto this historical figure... especially in regards to their motivations. The best I got from those texts was, in summary, ‘A Witch from a couple millenia ago that specialized in Pyromancy and was said to have consumed Fae, Humans, and Fek’tal by the *thousands*’. Which sounded reasonable enough, but to be honest I’ve never really been particularly clear on the relative power scaling of Witches.

The far more useful texts on the subjects came from various diaries, notebooks, and haphazard papers and parchments that I’d collected over the last decade or so from the Domains of the Tea Party Witches. I was never told exactly what it was that Hushpuppy received from them for ‘renting’ out my *Dust Bunny* Ability, but I had long since struck my own deals with all of them. Any written text that wasn’t on a shelf or in a desk or otherwise secured, I got to take back to my library for safe keeping. The references to The Ancient Witch Kaz’bek in these texts were significantly more... unsettling.

According to a worryingly old piece of parchment that I found between two couch cushions in Meverastethin’s storage house, The Ancient Witch Kaz’bek was certainly born a Human. While not strange by itself, the document stated - with great confidence - that their Ability before they became a Witch was *Pyrokinesis*... which is **insane**. That’s the type of thing you see in silly little

adventure stories for kids. Like... how does one's early childhood have to play out for them to develop an obsession with **fire** strong enough to develop a PsyEn Ability to control it?

Yikes!

Otherwise, there was a lot of stuff about them using Magic to do all manner of pointless things, like mess with volcanos or turn all the fires in a given *country* different colours. A document I found under a rug in Viktor's study referred to such events as 'classic pranks'. The stranger thing - to me anyhow - is how all of the writing has specifically distinguished between Fire Magic and Pyromancy. I can't really imagine why the two would be different... but maybe it's an input versus output thing? I'm certainly not about to question the learned Witches of ages past.

Pyrokinesis as a Human... Pyromancy and Fire Magic as a Witch... all of that power... and I've only ever been familiar with them as a twitching pile of ashes in The Slaughterhouse that I've spotted out of the corner of my eye *maybe* twice (it's so dark in there). Such an apparently important figure in Sol'balim's history, yet there is so little *actual* information out there on them. I guess we'll be going in mostly blind on this excursion...

As usual.

"Nova you done reviewing notes or whatever?" Hushpuppy spoke without looking up from a small leather bag that she was poking around within. She was sitting on the front desk, kicking her bare feet in the air, clenching and unclenching her long, sharp, blackened toes. She was wearing her usual big, floppy, pointed hat and the outfit I purchased a long time ago for her when we attended my first Tea Party, which happened to double as our shop uniform.

"Yup," I glanced into the bag as I passed and saw a bunch of random objects that I recognized as door charms, "I haven't seen you use one of those in a while."

"Yeah. I haven't exactly been to most of the places we are going today often like I have with *The Slaughter House* or *The Wrong Hallway*. I usually take a little something from these places to make a bit of dimensional anchor to help me find them again. Just taking stock is all."

"Cool. Well, I'm ready so let's get this done." I wasn't terribly excited about going to multiple *Wrong Places* in a single day, but we didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

"Not so fast, child. Come with me." She suddenly snapped her bag shut and kicked off of the front desk. Despite the apparent lack of effort, she floated almost 10 meters - half the distance between the back wall and front door - and landed with an audible tap of her nails against the wood floor. I tried to follow her example and take steps that were twice or thrice my stride length across the shop, but I'd yet to understand even a little bit the exact nonsense that she uses to bend the space of our shop to her will like that.

She stopped in front of the front door and held a hand out in front of me when I reached for the handle, "Okay. We are going to be investigating a number of *Wrong Places*. As you said before, it is highly likely that The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek used one of the tenuous connections that I may or may not have left behind to cross into another *Wrong Place*. Now thankfully, I don't actually

go to *that* many *Wrong* Places directly from other *Wrong* Places, and certainly not from *The Slaughter House*.” Great. The word *Wrong* was starting to not sound like a word anymore... which I guess wasn’t a terrible thing?

“We’ve been over most of this before. This is also more of an explanation than you normally give me for *anything*.”

“You’ve interacted with *The Sepulcher* and you’ve been inside of *The Slaughter House*, *The Wrong Hallway* and *The Eye of the Storm*. But now we are going to new places, a bunch of them in a row. I need you to keep a few things in mind.”

I nodded affirmatively, “My name and my title right? I’m A Chore Girl Called Nova and you’re A Witch Called Hushpuppy.”

“Yes. But there are some rules too. Never. **Ever**. Comment out loud concerning your perception of how long or how far we’ve traveled. Understood? You’re a smart girl, so you can likely guess at what may happen.” Umm?

“I... can do that.”

“On that same note, don’t comment out loud on how you’re feeling physically. Don’t say that you’re hot or cold or tired or hungry or thirsty. I don’t know what might happen and don’t really want to know.” It was rare to put this much concern into... Well, anything I suppose.

“Last. I’ve never seen a single other entity in any of the new places you are about to see. If we see anything other than a writhing mass of ashes... we *run*. Plain and simple. I’ll make an emergency door back to *The Slaughter House* and from there back here.”

“Got it.” To be honest... This was actually pretty scary. I’m twenty years old and just barely have a handle on the normal world that we live in. I’d never given too much thought to *Wrong Places* and how they might have different rules all together, “Are these places seriously *that* unstable that we could accidentally speak feelings into existence?”

“Maybe. I’m not taking chances with you involved.” Aw.

“I see... Well, I understand and I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go.” Hushpuppy pulled open our front door and there was a small pop as a tenuous connection between *Right* and *Wrong* was made. There was naught but darkness beyond the opened Threshold and the scent of rust and metal and blood and wet meandered out. We stepped into the darkness and the door shut behind us. I heard Hushpuppy open her leather bag and start rummaging while I stood in the pitch blackness trying to control my breathing. I haven’t had to come in here too frequently throughout my life but waiting for Hushpuppy to either turn on a light or open another door was always the worst part.

It’s easy to forget just how **dark** perfect dark is.

“Ah. There it is.” There was a metallic plink as Hushpuppy pulled something out of the bag and three taps behind me as she knocked on the Threshold to alter its connection. I turned to face the tapping behind me and Hushpuppy took my hand.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” She opened the door and I flinched at the sudden brightness beyond the doorway as we stepped through. Hushpuppy clicked her tongue next to me as she looked behind us and found that the door was **very** slowly closing behind us. She couldn’t seem to do anything to speed its closure either.

Hushpuppy blew raspberries derisively, “So that’s how that is... Well, let’s look around.”

We were standing on a path that appeared to be made of one extremely long, contiguous stone. Beautiful green grass that came up to the top of our ankles seemed to extend all the way to the deep blue, cloudless horizon on either side. All along the side of the stone path, sticking up out of the grass, were these... **gargantuan** white trunks that were probably just shy of one hundred meters tall. From the top of each trunk were three blades that were just over half the trunk’s height. You could hear the distant sound of metal groaning against metal in every direction as the blades lazily spun in circles... They were like giant metal windmills gently spinning as the grass below danced.

But there was no breeze... no movement of air in the *slightest*.

“Nova. Come!” Hushpuppy was tugging on my hand, “I know it’s a lot, but don’t lose yourself in here.”

“R-right.” I replied as I squeezed her hand.

We walked hand-in-hand along the hard stone path, beneath the massive metal windmills that groaned and creaked above us. Who built these things and how long ago? How were they still spinning and what was their purpose? How do you make a path *this* long out of a single stone? And-

I shook the thoughts from my head. We were here with a purpose and I couldn’t let myself get distracted by the scenery. It didn’t feel like we were making much progress towards anywhere in particular, but if I glanced backwards, there were certainly more windmills behind us than there were when we started. I Reinforced my eyes and nose as best as I could, trying to spot any gray against the immiscible seas of green and blue that stretched infinitely in every direction. This place simply smelled like cut grass, despite there being no evidence that the grass had *ever* gone through any specific care. That aside, I couldn’t detect any anomalies that smelled either like ashes or like the wet, rusted metal of *The Slaughter House*.

“...Something else has been through here.”

“Really? I can’t see or smell anything unusual.”

“Ah so that’s what you were doing. Not a bad idea, but *Wrong Places* are weird in that your senses will get crossed. You are seeing *and* smelling - or rather - you’re smelling *what* you’re seeing here. This place has no scent.”

“What? How do you-”

“Close your eyes and try.” I followed her directions and inhaled and smelled-

Nothing?

Oh shit. My eyes snapped open and I looked at her wide-eyed.

“Indeed. *The Slaughter House* didn’t really *used* to have a scent until copious amounts of very real blood started getting spilled there across the last century or two. You don’t so much smell the location itself so much as what’s been done there.” It was a bit uncanny to have Hushpuppy giving explanations that not only tracked with reality, but were indicative of considerable analysis on her part.

“...I see. How do you know that something came through here, then?”

“Look at the grass around us,” I glanced around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. It was all just swaying in the nonexistent breeze, “See how the tips of the grass are all pointing slightly in the direction that we’re walking?”

“Now that you mention it... yeah they are doing that.”

“Every time I’ve come here before, all the grass was pointing straight up. There is no *real* lateral wind here, so that means-”

“At some point recently, two Thresholds were opened at once.” I finished for her. It’s almost comical how frequently I forget that Hushpuppy’s an *apex predator* that hunts Fae for sustenance. Her attention to detail when searching for a creature to eat is nearly unmatched.

Hushpuppy gave my hand a little squeeze, “Good girl. Very smart. That also means that we are done in this location.” She pulled me off the path towards one of the metal windmills. Using her free hand, she reached back into her bag of door charms and pulled out a small white card with a black stripe on it that seemed to be covered in a thin layer of shiny glass. She tapped on the windmill and a door appeared. I still hadn’t quite mastered the concept of ‘anything can be a rectangle if you try hard enough’ that Hushpuppy employed along with door charms to open stable Thresholds without drawing the door first, but I suppose that’s why she was the master and I was the apprentice.

Hushpuppy held her hand up to the giant metal windmill, ready to knock, “Ready?”

I wasn’t, but I replied nonetheless, “Let’s go.”

Hushpuppy

As far as *Wrong Places* went, this one was probably my least favourite one.

Stepping through the Threshold from *The Rotating Field* and found ourselves in the middle of what I've taken to calling *The Painted Lot*. There were several buildings that had long since fallen into ruin and been reclaimed by 'nature' in this place: all piles of fractured bricks, twisted and rusting metal, and broken glass. All of this surrounded a massive chunk of land - as big as a major city's town square - that consisted of a single, mostly unbroken, dark grey, flat piece of stone. There were a few spots where the stone dipped and led to some metal grate - presumably for drainage - and bizarrely, hundreds of U-shaped semi-rectangles painted on top of the stone.

"This is the second time now," Nova ground her heel against the stone floor, "What *is* this stuff? It's so- well, you know." Sturdy, she wanted to say, but was unsure if she was allowed to at the moment.

"You encounter this stuff in most *Wrong Places* that are outdoor areas. Not sure what it is though... or who - or what - built any of this."

"Right? If there are broken-down buildings, that certainly implies that there used to be... *something* living in these spaces. There's... purpose here. I mean, look at all the little red islands." She pointed to a nearby slightly upraised circle full of what felt like wooden splinters dipped in some kind of muted red colouring. From the center of these circles were small trees whose leaves did not move in the slightest. There were a little over a dozen of these small islands scattered about The Painted Lot.

The symmetry on display here was *disturbingly* Human.

"Let's trace the edges of the lot and then move on." I suggested to my charge, who had regained enough nerve upon our arrival to let go of my hand.

"Sounds good." And so we walked and walked and walked and walked. Ugh, this place was so massive. What was all of this empty space **for**, exactly?

"You learn anything useful about Kaz'bek in those books earlier?" I was getting bored just walking in silence. I must have gotten used to her constant chatter from when she was a child.

She jumped at the sudden broken silence, "Oh- ah, maybe? I don't know. There was a lot of conflicting information."

"Oh really? Humor me."

"Well, I'd separated all the works into largely two broad categories: Human Narrative and Witch Narrative. I think it is safe to ignore pretty much every single letter written by Humans on the subject of The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek. All of it is so deeply rooted in disdain; disdain for her power, her beauty, and her diet. I understand not wanting to be eaten - no one *wants* to be eaten - but most of the writing had more of a tone of 'how dare she eat us to survive?' All of that tracked pretty well. For all the eating of other creatures that Humans did, they tended to be weirdly uppity about the notion of being consumed themselves.

“Humans do seem to be wracked with the misconception that they occupy a dominant spot on the food chain of Sol’balim. Even though Fek’tal and Fae chow down on them all the time... not to mention the various hybrid entities out there.”

Nova’s face was unreadable, “My own humanity aside, there *does* seem to be a lot of ego tied up in the whole thing... Anyhow... depending on the texts you read, she was either covered in burns and grotesque or beautiful enough to melt your eyes... Black haired or brunette or red-head or vulette and literally every eye-colour ever. The only thing anyone can seem to agree on about the Ancient Witch’s physical description is that she was *super* tall. And based on what I’ve read in Human texts, I honestly can’t rule out that *that* isn’t just a consistent fetish amongst scholars and writers.”

I chuckled quietly, “Well, if it is any consolation, their physical description shouldn’t matter anymore. They should just be a pile of ashes now... Albeit a tad more mobile than anticipated. With the Threshold that was opened up in *The Rotating Field* in mind, we should expect that they have at *least* a limited capacity to use Magic.”

“If that really is the case, are we gonna be okay?” Aw. Such worry.

“Have a bit more confidence, you’ve conquered **dust** after all!”

Nova shook her head, “You and the rest of the Tea Party weigh my Ability a bit too heavily I think... What if they get the jump on us? The various Witch texts I’ve managed to decipher talk about some *pretty* scary things.”

“Oh? What kind of *scary things*?”

“I mean... At first a lot of them seemed like... *jokes*, you know? That’s how they read: like dark, terrible, terrifying *jokes*.” Well *that’s* unsettling.

“How do you mean?”

“Things like entire *islands* being rendered uninhabitable because they could *force* volcanoes to erupt, or keep the temperature of entire regions so high as to cause droughts until the rulers of those lands gave in to their demands. They kind of sound like-”

“A natural disaster?” I interjected, she was psyching herself out *way* too much in the middle of a *hunt*, “Yeah. Apparently all the Ancient Witches were like that back then. But they all also seem to be dead or missing for about a millenia now. So I guess they couldn’t have been *that* powerful, after all, we’re still here, aren’t we?”

Nova frowned a bit, but nodded, “I suppose so...”

“Anyhow, to answer your question from earlier. If she jumps us, then I’ll just protect you until you can do your part, *duh*. I’ve seen their persistent remains a few times in *The Slaughter House* over the last couple of centuries. I never really got any sense of *danger* from them. Plus, I don’t think Meverastethin would have sent us on this hunt if we weren’t capable of handling it.

Remember, we are *pretty* high up on the food chain!" I tried to end my explanation on a light note; fear only dulls the senses, after all.

"Pretty high up... huh? So then: what *does* occupy the top of the food chain? It would have to be either Witches or Drax, correct?" Nova mused over a rather ancient question.

"Hmm... It's hard to say. If the Drax were at all concerned with proliferation, most of the food chain would have collapsed I think. They are capable of devouring *all* Humans if they chose to. And the Plague for All Seasons that occupies their previously Human *Substance* can completely collapse a Fae's *Soul* and is *terribly* contagious amongst the Fae. But there are only eight of them, at least on this continent... and they are oddly content to just run their little renewable protection racket in the center of the Human territories. The Humans simply abide them because Drax hunting is even *more* aggressively suicidal than Witch hunting because you are never dealing with just *one* Drax."

"Huh... There are a lot of things of interest there and I'm gonna have you elaborate on all of that later when I have a notebook and a pen. However, it still doesn't answer the question: who stands at the top of the food chain, deities aside?"

"Meverastethin."

"Not Witches in the broad sense?"

"No. You must keep in mind that you've only really interacted with the small subset of Witches that are 1) stronger than most and 2) open to negotiation. That's the general makeup of the Tea Party; why do you think such a group was formed?"

"...Boredom, mostly?" Hah!

"Fair guess, I suppose. No it is to force powerful Witches to wear the trappings of cooperation long enough for us to acquire mutual interests. Once one Witch's interests are tied to something another can do, who is in turn wrapped up in something yet another Witch can do..." I let the idea trail off, Nova was more than smart enough to figure this out.

"...Eventually it becomes unclear *who* you'd piss off if you crossed a given Witch, even if they were weaker than you." Nova concluded after a short pause.

"Exactly. At this point, nobody has *any* idea what exactly Meverastethin's interests even *are*."

"Then I guess my only other question would be: how do you know who is 'stronger than most'? Is it just age?"

I laughed a bit at that, I suppose this was a long time coming too, "No-no. Every Witch at the Table has murdered a Witch in their own Domain" Nova's gaze snapped towards me, shock written all over her face.

"You too?"

"Me too. As you can imagine, it's not easy."

“...Oh.”

We completed our circumnavigation of *The Painted Lot* in silence as she mulled over this information. Once more, something had definitely been through here before us. Despite the fact that the buildings surrounding the lot were in shambles, the incomplete painted rectangles and the stone which it all laid upon had always been pristine the few times I'd been here. But this time I'd seen a few... smudges I guess? As if something highly abrasive dragged or slid across the lot.

Ashes, perhaps?

“Alright. I think we're done here, Nova.” I reached an open, grasping hand towards her and she stepped in to take it into her own.

“Shouldn't we go poking around the buildings?” She asked as she gestured with her free hand at the areas surrounding *The Painted Lot*.

“I'm uncertain of the nature of the surrounding area. But it's been my experience that the area outside of the lot is unapproachable from the inside of the lot.” The closer you got to some imaginary line, the more your movement slowed down, as if you were walking through increasingly viscous pudding.

“Yikes, creepy.”

“Rather. There's one more place to check. If we don't see them there... Well, we don't want to be in *Wrong Places* for **too** long.” I guided her over to one of the many incomplete rectangles and dropped the final door charm on the ground: It was a small, crumpled up, rectangular piece of paper with some grease-like stains on it and a bunch of nonsense light grey scribbles on it that neither myself nor Nova knew how to read. I reached for the door, but paused just before pantomiming turning the invisible doorknob, “Oh yeah. No matter what happens in there... do **not** drink *anything*.”

Nova

The room was humid and reeked of burnt coffee.

We shut the door behind us with a muted jingle. I glanced back and saw a door that appeared to be made of glass and steel with a little bell attached near the top of it. It was uncomfortably bright outside; blindingly white. Perhaps it was a sunny day and there was snow outside? Looking around at the structure we'd entered from *The Painted Lot*... it was really, *really* odd. Maybe odd isn't *quite* the correct term... judging by the long counter in front of us and the many booths running along the just as many windows, this place must be a pub of some kind. But as far as pubs went, it was the blandest, most inoffensively milquetoast pub I'd ever laid my eyes upon. We approached the counter and looked up and down the row of tall, maroon bar stools that only had a singular metal leg and a weird metal ring near the bottom; presumably for resting your feet on.

As we walked, there was an unsettling stickiness to the floor and a complementary *ripping* sound each time we lifted our feet. Gross.

Hushpuppy let go of my hand and walked left between the bar counter and the booths along the window down the long side of the structure. I went right to take a peek around the corner, hoping to eliminate any blindspots *just* in case something else was in here. I poked the top of one of the bar stools as I walked by; it was an odd material. Squishy, bordering on soft, but contained within some substance that wasn't *quite* leather. I honestly had no idea what to make of it. I could never tell if these *Wrong Places* were more or less advanced than Sol'balim. There was precious little chronistic consistency between all of these not places. It extended to the very makeup of the buildings that were either within or the totality of these *Wrong Places*.

This place - for example - was definitely not made of wood... or at least anything I could easily identify as wood. The offwhite counter matched the pearl shade of the walls well enough, but this consistency could not distract from the baffling choice of alternative pale pink and puke green diamond-shapes that made up the floor. Stranger still was the fact that everything was so... *shiny*. It was as if everything had a thin layer of glass over it that was catching light from an odd angle. Except the blinding white light from the outside didn't seem to be contributing to the actual lighting here. That dubious honor belonged to the humming rectangles on the ceiling that emitted a harsh, piercing light; not unlike an overcharged, out of control lumen crystal.

I just wish all the surfaces weren't as sticky as they were shiny.

I took a look around the corner and saw what I will henceforth refer to as *The Sticky Pub* appeared to continue around in some kind of square. Looking on the ground, I saw no evidence of ashes anywhere; I couldn't imagine a pile of moving ash *not* leaving any obvious residue behind on such a sticky tile(?) floor. I was not, however, about to let Hushpuppy out of my line of sight in such an uncomfortable place. Satisfied that I'd done my part, I turned around back towards Hushpuppy, grabbed the coffee I'd ordered, and went-

Coffee?

Do not drink anything.

I gasped and focused as much PsyEn as I could around my head as I was suddenly aware of the fact that I'd brought a mug of coffee that I don't remember *ever* having mere centimeters away from my lips. Wide-eyed, I *slowly* fought against a bizarre set of impulses that did **not** feel like my own and set the coffee mug down on the nearby counter. I had no recollection of seeing or ever having a mug to begin with. Was it this place? When did it get in my head? How long had it been distracting me and convincing me that I'd been at some sort of pub waiting for an order to arrive?! Where-

Tap

"OW!" Both my hands came up to my forehead in response to Hushpuppy flicking my forehead.

"You good now?" She looked concerned. Had she been saying my name this whole time? How-

“...I... think I need to leave here. It’s-”

“I get it.” Hushpuppy glanced around... nervously?

“Why didn’t you mention-” She pressed a finger against my lips.

“*Wrong Places* are very susceptible to...” She trailed off and sighed, “Just- I get it, okay? Give it no more thought. Hold my hand.” Hushpuppy squeezed my hand tightly as she pulled me around the corner that I’d originally investigated, scanning back and forth quickly. I wanted to tell her to slow down, but I was afraid to even think too much. After making it halfway around some central area that looked like a shiny, kitchen made of steel, we reached a dead end with a pair of doors that had weird effigies of what was probably meant to be Humanoids of some kind, but one was shaped like a cone for what I can only imagine were sinister reasons.

Hushpuppy wasted no time in reaching into her bag and pulling out a rusted iron key, which I recognized as the door charm for *The Slaughter House*. Apparently we were done and going back home, but she was unwilling or unable to go directly back to the store front from here. She tapped the door and turned the knob, pulling me through into the darkness beyond as she pushed the Threshold open. As the door shut behind us and the perfect dark engulfed us, I felt my mind clear considerably. I hadn’t even realized what a fog had overcome me as soon as we entered *The Sticky Pub*.

I had underestimated *Wrong Places*.

Actually using my head now: *of course* the *Wrong Places* that the two of us and the other Witches had been using were the **significantly** more innocuous ones. They wouldn’t put themselves at risk by repeatedly entering places that they didn’t *understand*. Hushpuppy was saying that these places are susceptible to suggestion and belief. *The Slaughter House* - despite being scary on a surface level - had a clear purpose; at least as defined by the entities that frequented it. Same with *The Sepulcher* and *The Eye of the Storm*; even *The Wrong Hallway* was used for something *specific*. But Hushpuppy didn’t take the time to explain the *Wrong Places* we just traversed because she hadn’t the slightest clue about their **purpose**.

She’s just been *walking into these places* for how long now?!

After a bit of rummaging in the dark, suddenly a Threshold opened and we stepped through into our store front. I shambled forward a few steps before sinking to the ground in relief. Home sweet home.

“Wow. I *hated* that. Let’s never do that again.”

“Yeah... This is kinda why I didn’t want to go on this excursion in the first place. If Kaz’bek got out into some undefined *Wrong Place*... it’s probably best to just leave them there... Are you okay though, child? You looked terribly ill in there.”

“I’m... okay now. I think. That was unnerving though... What in the world *were* those places?!” I knew she didn’t know but I *needed* to vocalize how I was feeling after holding back essentially all day.

"Your guess is as good as mine. We should get some rest."

"But we haven't-"

"-We do *not* want to encounter an Ancient Witch - no matter how diminished they may be - at anything less than our best." It will never *not* feel strange when Hushpuppy is actually being reasonable for a change.

"...You're right... I'm going to go scrub the bottom of my shoes. I feel like they'll never be- Oh by the Four you walk around ***barefoot!***" I think I'm gonna puke.

"Eh. True I should probably-"

"Find some lava or something to dunk them in! Good Gods." I pulled off my shoes and threw them by the front door, "Go outside! I'm going to heat up some water and get some soap!"

"Sure feels like you're making mountains out of ant-"

"-**No!** I won't feel clean again until our feet are taken care of!"

"***Ugggghhhh fine.***" Hushpuppy relented and opened the door to sit on the front stoop, awaiting my further instructions as I scampered to the kitchen and back, jumping right back into the usual routine.

Chapter 3: Hegemony of the Food Chain

Hushpuppy

This is such a draaaaag.

Like... I *get* that I'm supposed to do my part in regards to Tea Party matters and that the only reason we aren't eating each other over territory is *because* we share interests like this...

But I don't wanna!~

Searching for *anything* that you can't find is the fourth most annoying thing in the world just behind Dusting, Sweeping, and Whaling. All missing things were always in the last place that you looked for them but for some reason you couldn't just look in the last place first, which always struck me as particularly unfair.

After searching through the three most likely Wrong Places that The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek might have escaped to, we decided to take a break for a few days. All *Wrong Places* seem to have their own rules that they abide by - not unlike Domains - and while most of them I'd encountered in the past were benign, you occasionally ran across the odd one that seemed to be possessed of a natural malevolence.

Nova seemed a tad shaken by the experience.

There was little use in trying to press forward past the mental, physical, and Magical fatigue that accompanied such excursions. If Meverastethin wanted this done more quickly, they *could* try and actually help us look. Honestly, I still was pretty unclear on what Meverastethin was so afraid of here. I could not figure out why they were so *certain* that the barely sentient ashes of an Ancient Witch could be a problem.

I felt like there were pieces deliberately missing here.

Oh well. Not really my problem. Or... I guess it is, but like indirectly at best. I reported my findings to Meverastethin personally after we returned and got Nova situated. The old Witch was not pleased with the evidence I had of Kaz'bek's passage, but they had a soft spot for Nova, so I was able to get away with taking a break for a week or two. Evidently - at least to Meverastethin - the issue at hand that *seemed* so critical that it needed to be handled **right now** was not worth losing everyone's favourite Chore Girl over. I had asked again about why they were **so** concerned about The Ancient Witch... but I got the same explanation that was given at the Tea Party meeting.

What is it that they *aren't* telling us?

Normally I would have checked in with T'Avi by now... but I'd visited her quite frequently within a short period of time lately. You don't approach the three century milestone by recklessly approaching the same Witch over and over. *Especially* when that Witch is not a Tea Party Witch. I've tried to get her involved a few times in the past - her ability to locate things being incredibly useful - but like many Witches, she was entirely disinterested in affairs outside of her territory. As for within her territories... as good of friends as we are, I'm fairly certain that she still kinda wants to eat me. And since I'd hate to have to murder such a good friend, so we'll give her some time to chill out so it doesn't come to that.

If she finds something... She'll probably send a spid- er, *critter* my way to let me know.

Anyhow, all of this *actual work* had gotten me feeling hungry. Like *hungry-hungry*. Like *Fae* hungry. I'd been sitting up on the ceiling in the storefront, unnoticed by the small number of customers that had been in and out of the store in the last smallish amount of time. Lots of *flowers* had been moved today, but not much else. I craned my head and back backwards to look down at the front desk; Nova was sitting down and scribbling stuff in a notebook. It wasn't one of the notebooks that she kept in her room and locked with some clever Magical mechanism to keep anyone but her from opening them. This is one of the shiny black notebooks she added to her own library whenever she was done filling them out; they were filled with notes she had taken on using Magic... trying to put some sort of Human logic to it all.

Adorable.

I let myself flip over as I jumped from the ceiling to the floor, startling the remaining customers within the building. I nodded as I passed them on the way to the front desk, ignoring their babbling greetings. I was pretty hungry, but not **emergency food** hungry so I definitely had it in

me to hunt something... *fresh*. Nova glanced up and shot me a slight smile as she finished whatever thought she'd been writing down.

"Sup?" Nova greeted me as she set down her pen.

"I'm going for a walk."

"Oh? So I can go light on dinner tonight then?"

"Yeah that's probably fair. Want to come?" Nova started briefly and blinked several times, apparently thrown off by what in my opinion was a rather simple yes or no question, "...You okay?"

"...I... You've never actually invited me to a feeding before. I was just surprised, is all." Way to answer the question, Nova.

"Well, you're like an adult now, right? So it seemed like the sort of thing you should learn how to do. So do you?"

"Oh ***absolutely not***. I understand that you *have* to do that to survive, but I don't think I'm quite ready to make *that* a regular part of my month yet."

"If you want to be-"

"-I know, Hushpuppy. I'm still thinking *that* through." I had to admit that that was fair. After all, Blossoming into a Witch would rob her of much of her utility to the Tea Party. She would have to figure out an alternative before she took that step.

"Well then I'm off to eat. Close up early if you want and go do something fun."

"Can do. Be safe."

I pulled my shortstaff out of my left sleeve and my kama off my waist and combined them with a twist, "Of course."

With that I entered the back hallway and opened a Threshold at my bedroom door far, far to the North, deep within the Magirradiated Fae Territory.

There is something quite comforting about getting back on your routine.

I crossed through the Threshold and stepped out of a heavily magiwarped tree. I glanced to my left at my decoy Threshold, once more splintered into thousands of pieces. I chuckled audibly; they still have no idea that I'm using the tree as my point of ingress. With a wave of my hand I restored the splinters to the door-sized, cracked piece of wood with a hastily painted picture of a door on the front. It was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle: since it *looked* like a door when I was done, this was clearly the natural form of the shattered wood and thus there was no reason for it to be shattered in the first place.

Poor, stupid *food*.

It was late evening here in the Fae Magirradiated Lands, which meant that it was terribly, terribly bright. I was currently standing in something akin to a valley at the foot of 7 or so massive hills. The hills each had rounded, bulbous tops that curled back over the rising portion of its own topography and cast suggestive shadows on the valley below. Pale blue and green and red grass danced, whipping around in a vicious gale that did not actually exist. Every now and then, the hills would tremor ever so slightly and the multi-coloured grass would fluoresce momentarily, oozing visible magirradiation into the air above. The Fae thrived under such conditions, able to feed their *Souls* on the residuals alone.

How frightfully self-sustaining.

Then again, a renewable food source is the *best* food source.

I took a deep breath - taking in the sugar-scented air - and started focusing my nose on picking out that most peculiar scent of living, breathing Fae. The characteristics were different than when one hunts Fae in the Human territories; out there you can just sniff about for the smell of Magic and magirradiation. In territories that were simply saturated with those two elements, a smart Witch (like myself) would tune their nose to the scent of flesh and blood and bone and a paradoxical dirth of *Substance*.

As usual, there was not a soul nearby. Most mature Fae knew to avoid a Witch's hunting ground, but I was hoping to pluck an easy, youthful Fairy to satiate myself. No such luck, so I began walking up the near completely vertical, multi-coloured, sheer hills around me. As I ascended I tipped my head back to look at the magiwarped tree that I used as an anchor for this Threshold. The leaves were easily double, maybe triple the size of an unwarped tree's and the bark was patchy with segments of light browns, dark browns, blacks, and the occasional garish orange. The limbs of this tree branched and branched and branched far more often than a normal tree would before braiding about each other and branching off once more. As far as trees went, this one was kind of amazing. The ability of plant life to adapt to magirradiation was something someone should look into; this is kind of why I thought I should bring Nova with me. She would probably find this sort of thing really interesting and - being as clever as she was - would probably be able to learn something interesting about the nature of Magic.

Some other time, perhaps.

Once I crested the top of the hill - which felt soft as a pillow beneath my bare feet - I just picked one direction and moved quickly. Not running - of course not - there was no need for such a thing out here in lands that were already magirradiated beyond any hope of repair. Here Magic could be wielded whimsically and without restraint or fear of reprisal, unlike in Human and Fek'thal lands. Everything here was connected by the delicious poison known as magirradiation, including patches of light, shadow, and colour. My feet began to glow as I decided on them as my focal points and - since they were less frequent, but still popped nicely - I decided I would traverse only upon blue grass. Each step changed my location inconsistently, sometimes a great distance, sometimes a small distance.

When traveling like this, I actually prefer *skipping*!

I had to admit that - in comparison to Fae territories - Human-settled landscapes were *dreadfully* dull. I looked up at the massive distended bubbles that floated in the sky where clouds used to reside. The sunlight passing through them was not as harsh due to distortion as they were in clear skies and occasionally fish even found their way up there. It took more than a little force to pop these bubble clouds though - trust me I've tried - but there was something quaint about fish raining down from the sky.

As I landed from a particularly long distance blue grass skip, I found myself at the foot of rolling hills - like, literally rolling - and nearly lost my balance as the ground trembled in response to the undulating wave form that churned infinitely in place. There was a **lot** of Magic at work here, with hundreds of glowing focal points in the sky far above the rolling hills. There were tons of Fae here, though they were not visible, I could definitely smell them. Just what were they trying to accomplish here? Even a Fae-adjacent entity like myself couldn't make sense of what the Fae that resided deep within their territories did on a daily basis. The Fae that resided near and within dead zones that bordered the Human territories were just built different - perhaps due to consuming Humans - their thought processes made a bit more sense to me.

Humans don't understand that the backlines Fae are *far* more mysterious and **far** more dangerous.

No Fae were approaching me at this point and I wasn't stupid enough to tangle with an army of Fae on my own. I picked a new direction, skipped for a few kilometers, and waited. After all, since I showed my face in front of so many, there were likely to be a few brazen youths that would want to keep an eye on me. After some moderate amount of time, I suddenly felt myself being somewhat surrounded. I sniffed the air: three young Fae, just a smidge too old to be Fairies, but too young to be considered mature. Seems to me like these three intended to eat me and were not looking to split their bounty too many ways.

Ah... *Youth*.

"A *Reaver*."

"Not just any Reaver! See the sickle?!"

"*The Farmer* has returned!"

"So alone! Why is it here?!"

I looked up and around; the three of them were jeering at me from the sky in Faedroth. Somewhere along the way, I'd consumed enough Fae that their language became imprinted in my *Soul*, so I could converse with them well enough. Witch was a decidedly Human term for Fae hybrid entities such as myself; maybe a slur, maybe not. The Fae on the other hand defined us more functionally - Reavers - ghastly foreign pillagers that stole and ate children and the unwary.

I suppose the irony is lost on them.

Though I had forgotten about their little nickname for me. It was based on my weapon of choice, though they likely were unaware of how close to the truth their name for me was. I certainly *was* a farmer before I was a Witch.

How *cute*.

“If you know who - and *what* - I am, surely you must have brought more than three of you. What? Did you get cut off from the Collective? Did that make you brave *and* stupid?” I faced the one who had deemed me ‘The Farmer’, a pale, faceless Fae with a small horn coming out of its temple region. As I taunted it, I drew half of a shoulder-width rectangle in the soft, bright yellow sand beneath with my foot. Language is important because it lets you prod other beings into making poor decisions.

The faceless one started forward but was stopped by some invisible signal from one of the others. The one in front of me *did* have a face, along with a darker complexion, a stouter torso, and what appeared to be golden butterfly wings. I saw four glowing, Magic focal points appear in the air in front of it and the two off to the sides follow suit with two focal points each of their own. As they prepared to enact their Magic, I finished the small door in the sand beneath me I was drawing with my foot and beat them all to the punch... er, kick I guess.

I stomped on the door and an unstable threshold appeared right next to the stout Fae. I reached through the Threshold - ignoring the tingling numbness that comes with passing through an air door - and grabbed the shocked Fae by the face with my foot. You see, THIS is why I’m always telling Nova that shoes are highly overrated. You just have so much more appendicular utility this way!

Anyways.

I yanked the Fae’s head through the unstable threshold and it immediately started screeching, sending the other two Fae into chaos. The faceless one sped through the air towards the rest of the stout Fae’s body and the other Fae - a thickly scaled, four armed one with a long neck - flew through the air towards me. Before the scaled one could reach me, I braced the stout Fae’s head against the edge of the Threshold with one foot and stomped the door shut with the other. I easily overpowered its attempts to both struggle against my grip *and* keep the Threshold open.

This decapitated it quite cleanly.

I dropped the head of the stout Fae and punted it away from the rest of its body - this would keep it from getting up for a few little bits - and swung my sickle at the approaching scaly Fae, who backed up and immediately began to use Magic. Suddenly the world swung about as the Fae placed me within an invisible, ‘enclosed’ space and inverted the gravity within. I tumbled upwards several meters and the scaly Fae dove towards me with sharp claws extended. It was a pitiful display, really, as this was the standard opening attack of most Magically adept Fae when attacking Humans: shift gravity, skewer, devour.

But I am *far* from Human.

I landed deftly on my feet, standing upside down in the air and baring my teeth at the incoming Fae. It *definitely* didn't anticipate this development and attempted to stop its approach. Unfortunately for the scaly one, it was going too fast and I swung my kama overhead, easily puncturing the weak *Substance* of its chest from below. It gasped and gurled uselessly as we tumbled through the air back down to the ground. I stuck my kama in my mouth and landed softly on all fours, the scaly Fae dangling and twitching uselessly from the sickle as purple and blue 'blood' bubbled from its open chest cavity and its joints for some reason.

Fae anatomy is so arbitrary.

Then again, that's part of what makes them fun to eat.

"...How- Not- Faaaair..." I ignored its gurgling commentary as I scanned the horizon for the faceless Fae from earlier. It seemed to have lost its nerve and was hiding... or more likely hoping for an attack of opportunity. I sniffed the air for the Magirradiation it had shed from its Magical foci... it was still nearby for sure, but...

Ah screw it.

I took my kama out of my mouth and slammed the blade into the ground with the scaly Fae still on it, pinning it to the earth. The stout Fae's body was crawling around, looking for its missing head and wouldn't be a problem for a little bit yet. I got down on all fours next to the scaly Fae and took in its sugary scent; my mouth was wet with anticipation.

"No-no-no-no-nononononono" It cried as I brought my teeth near to its neck, but did not bite down. As expected, several massive tendrils of living earth shot from the ground around us and towards me. I jumped backwards as a Geomantic dome formed around my interrupted meal, protecting it from further harm. Since the ground itself isn't allowed to play favourites, I told the hungry earth to open wide and reveal the hidden Fae. A 20ish meter wide hole opened up underneath me and I fell towards a fearful and frozen faceless Fae. I landed after a several meter drop with a foot on each of its shoulders, grasped its head in my hands, reared my head back, and snapped my whole body forward.

My hat flew off my head as my teeth sunk into its forehead. My jaw clenched and I ripped a large chunk of its head off, its flesh and 'bone' dissolving quickly in my mouth. It tasted sweet yet tart, like a mix of red and blue berries both young and old. As I pulled my mouth away from the creature, I could feel its *Soul* coming with it, drinking into my own through my teeth. A refreshing coolness ran down the entirety of the inside of my body as I dismounted from its shoulders and took another large bite or two. It had no mouth to scream and it was young enough that a single chomp was enough to pull the majority of its *Soul* out and render it catatonic.

I could eat this one at my leisure later.

I tossed its slumped, still body out of the hole and jumped up after it. The scaly Fae was *just* managing to pry itself off of my kama. I grasped the end of my kama-staff and forced it back into the scaly Fae with a little twist before bending down to take a bite out of this one as well. This

one was more savory and... stringy. Not my favourite, but variety is important to any diet. It too went perfectly still as I wrenched its young, weak essence from its body. It was always very important to make sure you either take a nice, existential bite out of a dying Fae or stab it with Meteoric Iron... otherwise its *Soul* will escape and add its own death to the Fae's collective knowledge. This makes every subsequent hunt **that** much harder.

The stout Fae's body was nearing its own head, which would be annoying if reattached. I stomped on the ground once and the earth under both the stout Fae's body shot up briefly, knocking both through the air towards me. I swiped its head out of the air and let the body land next to me, where I quickly amputated it with my kama. Its head screeched wordlessly in my hand but I ignored it, tossing it aside and opting to take several bites out of its chest until it and the rest of its carved bits went silent. This one kinda tasted like apple pie, all cinnamon and sugar and crunchy yet gooey.

This one would be desert, I decided.

I looked on the ground around me at my slaughtered prey and had to marvel at the recklessness of youth. They recognized me enough to pull my nickname out of their hive mind, yet couldn't recognize our relative places on the food chain. Past Hushpuppy must be incredibly thorough to keep so much foolish prey around. Three young Fae was like... a lot of food, but now that the process had started and their *Souls* were anchored to mine through the First Bite, I'd have to finish all three meals before going home. Metaphysical ties aside, I am not now nor have I ever been one to waste food!

What a *beautiful* day for a hunt!

Nova

It's kinda strange how quickly you can fall back into routine after breaking away from it in such an extreme way.

I mean, we were just walking... I guess *between* dimensions that seemed to have a sinister agency in of themselves. How a space can have a *will* was certainly beyond me, but even more concerning was that we were right to be checking those spaces. I felt really bad that I couldn't last long enough to follow through and find our target, but Hushpuppy seemed - as ever - unconcerned. Her plan seemed to be to have T'Avi, the Weaver keep an eye out for the Ancient Witch's ashes on Solbalim, using what were clearly Magic spiders to feed her information across vast distances.

And now here we are back in the shop like none of it ever happened.

Hushpuppy had returned from her 'walk' last week looking at worst 'a bit dirty', but was practically glowing with satisfaction. She'd been so caught up in the thrill of a well-executed hunt that she hadn't even bothered to clean the weird multicoloured Fae blood off of her face, hands,

and feet. It didn't particularly bother me; after all, a girl's gotta eat. To be bothered by a Witch eating Fae, but continue to enjoy lamb or beef myself would be **pretty** hypocritical.

I mean, even livestock screams.

But that was pretty well besides the point right now.

It had been another lucrative week in the shop - one of many in a row, actually - so Hushpuppy had been in and out of the Armory with products to fill the empty spaces on the shelves. She was particularly productive in this way just after she'd consumed a Fae and especially so if she consumed more than one. As I understood it, she used the creation of Magic items and tools as a way of offsetting excess *Soul* from her body before she started to change too much or acquire too many undesired traits. This, along with powering her Domain allowed her to maintain a fairly stable *Substance* even close to 300 years into her long life of devouring the *Souls* of Fae.

But judging by the state of many of the older Witches... I had to wonder how long she'd be able to keep this up.

It was late in the evening when Hushpuppy entered the storefront from the back hallway - feet on the floor for a change - and a small procession of items floated in the air behind her in single file. Most of them I recognized, such as the weirdly good sellers like Lightning in Jars, Tempests in Teapots, and a Pouch of Lost Marbles. As well as products that did not sell but goddammit Hushpuppy thought they ought to like Cloud Sandles (for walking on clouds, which is as impractical as it sounds. Like, how is a Human going to get up to the clouds to make walking on them of any value?!). Then there were a couple of small, palm-sized circles that seemed like bracelets, one was plain silver-white while the other one seemed to have intricate designs on it.

"Hushpuppy, what're those?"

"It's a secret!"

"...Nope. I have to *sell* these things, remember? I can't **not** know what they are."

"Oh, right." She started walking around to empty spaces on shelves and gently, "Put the fancy one on your wrist." The two bracelets floated to the front desk where I sat. I gingerly reached out and plucked them out of the air, sliding the fancy one onto my left wrist. It changed size to hug my wrist snugly, but not uncomfortably.

"Okay?"

"Now say a number, one through ten. Never say zero while wearing the bracelet-portion though, I don't actually know what will happen." Goddammit, Hushpuppy.

I sighed, then said, "Three." I felt my voice carry Magical weight and the circle on the table went from palm-sized to arm's length-sized in an instant. Unfortunately I had set the circle down on the table and the force of its expansion hitting me in the chest launched me from my chair. Just before I hit the ground, I stopped and found myself floating and heard Hushpuppy's bare feet slapping on the ground quickly.

“...Ow...”

“Whoops. Forgot about that.”

“Yeah. *You did!* One!” The circle returned to its original size and I glared at Hushpuppy as I got my feet back under me and stood before her, “What - exactly - is this tool supposed to be for?!”

“It’s called a Perfect Circle! And it’s for drawing circles!” Hushpuppy proclaimed with completely unwarranted pride.

“Drawing circles.” I repeated flatly.

“Yup! You know how we are always drawing doors, so we are pretty awesome at drawing perfect rectangles really quickly. And so that got me thinking, what if some doors were *circular*. Wouldn’t *that* be neat? But it turns out drawing a perfect circle is like... **really hard**. So I made something that’s an adjustable, perfect circle that you can trace inside of!” That’s so... *stupid*...

“...”

“Neat, right?”

“Hushpuppy, there is **no** way that this thing isn’t used for restraining, sex, or both!”

“WHAT?! That’s ridiculous!”

“It’s really not.” I picked up the Perfect Circle and held it, “Three.” It expanded and I slid it over her so that she was standing inside of it just below her shoulders, “Two.” It snapped to a smaller setting and Hushpuppy winced as her arms were pinned to her side.

“Oooooooooooh. Yeah. Yep, I definitely see it now.”

“Three. One.” I released Hushpuppy and brought it back down to base level, “We probably shouldn’t sell something that can be *accidentally* activated by saying a number. Empowering common numbers with Magic wasn’t a great idea I don’t think.” Hushpuppy was pouting at me as I spoke, but she seemed to understand.

“Fiiine. Oh well, what’s for dinner?”

“Hushpuppy...”

“...Nova...?”

“I appreciate the break... But it’s been over a week now. We **are** going to have to start searching for Kaz’bek again, you realize that, right?”

“Eh...” She vocalized noncommittally. Ugh.

“No like, Meverastethin *specifically* said that this was an **us** problem. So we shouldn’t dilly-dally too long.”

“You’re using your Human timescale again, Nova. ‘Soon’ gives us *plenty* of time to get back to our search at our leisure.”

“I mean... I gu-”

Click.

That small sound sucked all of the air out of the room, stopping not only my words, but both of our trains of thought as well. Hushpuppy’s Traveling House of Strange and Wonderful and Terrible and Useful Goods was a Domain, after all, and that means there are **rules**. *Magically enforced rules*. The first rule of course being: you can’t enter Hushpuppy’s house without knocking or being invited inside. But here we were... Hushpuppy and I were standing in the storefront of our home as the gentle, but impossible scraping sound of a doorknob turning far too slowly came from the front door. We glanced at each other wide-eyed and nodded: Hushpuppy’s Kama appeared in her hand and I activated *Dust Bunny*, readying a small clump of dust. Intruders should be impossible, but...

The door *creaked* open

For several agonizingly long seconds, there was silence. Then a hand(?) reached around from the otherside, grasping the outer edge of the door half a meter above the doorknob. As it did so something was dripping- no, *sloughing* off of the semi amorphous appendage. Some kind of dusty, grey, fine particulate mat-

“*Ashes.*” I whispered in the terrifying realization that our quarry had come to us.

The door was pulled open and there was an audible crackle as the Domain’s intrusion failsafes were overpowered or perhaps deflected by overwhelming brute, Magical force. There stood a rough approximation of a Human...ish form. They shambled forward, ducking their impressive two-plus-meter height under the door frame. As they moved, ashes drifted towards the floor, but - as if caught in some kind of orbit - started swirling back up towards some invisible core. Clearly, they barely had enough *Substance* to hold their form together... but they were *somehow* compensating for that with an **overwhelming** amount of *Soul*.

They shut the door behind them.

Was it just me, or was it *significantly* warmer in here all of a sudden?

“Good Evening, girls. There was a small army of spiders spinning a web into the shape of the word ‘nuR’ in front of your front door, but I take it neither of you have been outside today...” The Ancient Flame Witch Kaz’bek broke the stunned silence first, speaking with a thick, unfamiliar accent. “That aside... Please, take a seat. No need for you to stand on my account.” They were seemingly oblivious to the gravity of this situation for myself or Hushpuppy, who had yet to take any actions at all. As she slowly made her way towards us across the storefront I glanced over at my de facto guardian who seemed to snap out of some kind of trance when she saw me move.

“*Nova!*” Hushpuppy jumped forward to put herself between myself and the Ancient Witch as I dropped the dust I’d gathered earlier and started to reactivate *Dust-*

“***I said:*** Take a seat.”

Suddenly myself, Hushpuppy, and The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek were in the kitchen’s dining area. Hushpuppy and I were sitting next to each other with our hands on the tables and the ashen Witch towered over us. They tilted their head at us, looking down with no discernible expression visible on the cloying, writhing ash that made up their form.

I couldn’t move my hands from the table.

“Good girls.” The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek clapped their hands twice, accompanied by a pair of muted slaps as ashes were thrown up into the air. The puff of ashes were pulled back into their orbit before falling to the table, “Now then...”

Hushpuppy

“First of all, A Witch Called Hushpuppy, let me start by saying that: I am *not* here to hurt you. On the contrary, I wish to offer my most sincere gratitude for everything that you have done for me over the last... well, likely a century or four.” This is *bad*. How is Kaz'bek walking around? Talking? Using **this** much Magic?! Where did all of this Substance come from? They were nothing but a pile before! They’re supposed to be *diminished!* *How can the power gap between them and I be **this vast?!***

“...Gratitude?” She actually **forced** my front door open... and gave an *order* to Nova and I... In **my own Domain**. Like woah... and also how?!

What are we going to do?

“But of course, young Witch. I was in *The Vacuous Tower* for quite a *long* time before any of you young Witches started using it as a feeding ground. I place tremendous value on the entertainment and meals you have provided me over the years. Such a dreadfully tiresome place to spend one’s time. So again, thank you kindly. After I realized it was *you* who was tracking me... well after I finished my errands, I thought I would save you the trouble.” The Ancient Witch shambled over to the other side of the table across from Nova and I. The ashen simulacrum of a Witch began to sit back and a chair came sliding into the room and beneath Kaz’bek to accommodate them.

“...Meals?”

The ashen Witch tilted its head at me briefly. It has no discernible facial features, but I could feel that it was befuddled by my confusion.

“Ah. Happy accidents, I suppose.” They concluded after a few moments, “It has been a slow process, consuming exclusively Fire worshippers amongst the hor devours that you’ve dropped in the tower. But fear not, I made sure your other offerings were left untouched. Such a proper junior you are, giving fresh, live game to your seniors.”

“...I have questions.” I began, trying to suss out their intentions in showing up here. They *had* to know why we were tracking them down.

“As do I!” Nova piped in unexpectedly and Kaz’bek’s head(?) shifted and writhed strangely.

“You... are the *little one*, no? My goodness how you have grown since the first time you passed through *The Vacuous Tower*,” The Witch waved one ashen hand at my Chore Girl and her Coating suddenly became visible to the naked eye. Nova bristled at this and narrowed her eyes, but otherwise didn’t comment on this incredibly... *unfamiliar* Magic. I didn’t even know it was possible to force PsyEn to be visible using Magic...

Nova responded very slow, “I... didn’t think you paid anyone or anything in there that much mind... You’re more coherent than I thought you’d be after a thousand years in the dark.”

“How well adjusted of you... both your Coating and your response. But of course though. After so many centuries of silence and darkness it becomes abundantly difficult to hold onto feelings like bitterness or anger. Who has the energy for that? As for what I mind or do not... truth be told, there used to be far more Humans with Coatings and expertise like yours back in the day. Your Soul is... *nostalgic*. You must know I was rather shocked when I returned to Solbalim to see so few Magicians out and about.”

“What are- were you doing in Solbalim?” Nova asked tentatively, jumping right to the point as usual. The Ancient Witch twitched their head-like appendage and paused for an uncomfortably long amount of time. I did *not* like how long they were staring at my charge.

“Obviously devouring Fae along with Fire-worshipping Humans and Fek’tal... Had you not heard? That is troubling... considering you were supposed to be searching for me. I did go on a bit of a binge there, I’m afraid. But *surely* you were able to detect *that* much! Were you even trying to find me, Hushpuppy?” Despite myself, my fists clenched and my nails carved into the table, briefly drawing the attention of Kaz’bek. Just then, I felt Nova’s Coating pull in briefly - as it does just before she activates her Ability - but the Ancient Witch’s ‘hand’ snapped up and Nova just... froze without finishing *Dust Bunny*’s activation.

Her face was red and she was sweating **profusely**.

“Not a *twitch* out of you, Nova. I know what you can do and I know how you two want to use it. I am well aware that you are the more dangerous one here.” The ashes that made up Kaz’bek roiled ominously as they sighed in something resembling disappointment, “How boorish... We have not even *begun* to have a conversation yet; it did not seem like you two ever had that intention. Hushpuppy, she takes her cues from you, so would you kindly still your heart? Do that and I’ll let her temperature return to normal.” I felt my eyes widen and I put my hands up and my palms forward.

The Anti-Magic Barrier necklace I’d made Nova so long ago didn’t even react!

“Nova. It is okay. We cannot fight this.” My poor child was terribly frightened, but she gave a single nod and the Ancient Witch put her hand down. Nova let out a long, shuddering sigh and

slouched in her chair. A glass of water appeared on the table in front of her with a *plink* that made her flinch.

“Drink up. We cannot have a *conversation* if your little mouth is parched, Nova.” Nova did as she was directed and the Ancient Witch returned her attention to me.

“You said earlier that you have questions, Hushpuppy. This is a good thing, as I have questions as well. Thus we can exchange information as reasonable adults do. Like I stated previously. I am *not* here to hurt you. So do all of us the courtesy of behaving yourselves and we can all come out as Queens in this situation. Understood? Good. First: What was your purpose in tracking me after I left *The Vacuous Tower*? Hushpuppy, kindly answer this question.”

I took a breath to steady myself, “We were tasked by Meverastethin to return you to *The Slaughter House*- I guess you refer to it as *The Vacuous Tower*.”

“Meverastethin must be the eldest Witch of your Coven, then?”

“Coven?”

“Surely Covens still exist? An alliance of Witches sharing neighboring territories and resources? Mutual protection based on numbers and variant expertise?”

“Uh... We’ve got a Tea Party... which is kind of like that but not really?”

The Ancient Witch twitched in their chair, “Explain.”

“It’s a group of Witches with widely entangled mutual interests that share information and generally are kept in check by an unknown number of intersecting deals. Also we drink tea in a *Wrong Place* occasionally and Nova cleans their Domains.”

“How... Unbelievably *inefficient!* No more than a poisonous Coven... What nonsense.” The Ancient Witch admonished our chosen method of organization without hesitation before continuing, “Ugh. I see. Yes. I do believe I understand what is at play here. So - at the behest of your Elder Witch - you were to hunt me down, contain me with *this one’s* Psionic Manifestation, return me to *The Vacuous Tower*... and then what? If I left once then who - exactly - was going to keep me there? Did you intend to leave the *Human* in there with me until the end of her lifespan?” I had no answer for that. Neither of us expected them - I guess *her*, based on that ‘queens’ comment - to have her faculties about her anymore. Let alone the capacity to use Magic at a magnitude on par with Meverastethin.

“Rhetorical - of course - unless the little one has something to add... No? Well now, before you two make your inquiries, I am going to do something and I need you to be *calm*.” The Ancient Witch raised a hand once more and both Nova and I tensed, but remained still. There was a crackling sound in the air, but not the same type of snap that accompanies a Domain punishing the breaking of a rule. Suddenly a Magical light emitted from the center of both Nova and I’s chests... some glowing symbol that I didn’t recognize sat there, cracked down the middle, then simply evaporated as if they’d never been there.

“What was-” Nova began.

“A Spatial Window Anchor. Almost elegantly put together too. *Almost*. How long - I wonder - have you two been monitored?” The Ancient Witch sighed once more, “No matter. Now I can ask this to you, Hushpuppy: Do you know why your Elder Witch wants you dead?”

??!?!?

““*What?!*””

She tilted her ‘head’ at the two of us, “Surely you must have considered this was nothing less than a suicidal endeavour? You’re likely one of the most powerful Witches in your Co- Ugh... **Tea Party**, Hushpuppy... but you were a thousand years too young and inexperienced to try to force me to do *anything* even before I started feeding within *The Vacuous Tower*. If the Elder Witch wanted something done about me - and I mean *really* wanted something done about me - they would have sent the Shadowed One or the Fek’tal. Or perhaps the Fek’tal is your Elder Witch?”

“They are, yes... and they are a Spatial Magic specialist so... Oh.” Nova spoke up for the first time Kaz’bek’s the earlier threat.

“Oh’ Indeed, *young lady*. My, you have raised an astute Human haven’t you, Hushpuppy? It is as you deduced, *little Nova*, your elder has been *observing* you two for some time. I wonder who it is that they’re afraid of: myself... or Hushpuppy.”

I scoffed at that. Meverastethin, afraid of *me*? What a childish fantasy. My face apparently communicated as much, as the Ancient Witch cackled viciously.

“I watched your hunt the other day, Hushpuppy - *yes of course* I was watching you do not give me that look - the way you move... especially the way you use Magic... it is very much like the Witches of *my* era. Agile like a beast, half-cut with the hunt, and strong independent of your Magic... You fit the role of *predator* much better than that of any armchair Magic user.” What is she even *on* about?

“I thought Witches just became more powerful with age?” Nova asked no one in particular.

“Correlation versus causation, Human. One must do more than simply eat Fae and unfold their *Soul*. One must learn, must feel, must hunt, and must *indulge their curiosity*.”

“In that case: If you aren’t here to hurt us... what is it that you *want*, exactly?” I asked, finally getting my bearings enough to start thinking again.

The Ancient Witch chortled at my segue and reached across the table to place a cloying, ashen hand upon one my own, “Just two things, good Witch: I want The Library and I want to have a chat with your Cov- *Tea Party*. The lot of you are lacking in *manners* and - as you well know - it is an adult’s duty to teach *children* the proper way to do things.”

“Huh. Okay, well the library is Nova’s problem and a lot less complicated. So why don’t we do that first.” I looked over at Nova who raised an eyebrow at me and I just shrugged. Maybe Kaz’bek was just super into books? The Ancient Witch looked back and forth between the two of us, clearly confused about something.

“The Library is in the care of a Human?”

“Well *I* certainly didn’t want it!”

Kaz’bek leaned forward slightly in her chair, “So it was yours!?”

“Of course, it was part of my Domain.”

“You!-”

“-But I didn’t even *want* it to begin with, so it’s Nova’s.”

“...” What are they so confused about?

“...” Nova and I glanced at each other worriedly.

Nova broke the awkward silence tentatively, “So... If I’m going to bring you to the library... you need to let us stand up.”

The ashy simulacrum twitched slightly, “Ah. After you then.”

Nova

We entered the library through the door to my bedroom. It wasn’t exactly clear to me why a several millennia-old Witch would have any interest in my small library, but here we were. The Flame Witch Kaz’bek immediately flew into the air as they took in the scope of the large, tall, brightly flower-lit room. Their head swiveled around several times as they floated into the air above the various bookshelves of my library. They were muttering some things to themselves that I couldn’t quite make out. While they were ignoring me, I simply grabbed three chairs, pulled them to the center of the entry area, and took a seat.

After another thirty seconds or so, they returned to ground level, “Where is the rest of it? I don’t sense any further unfolding in this dimension.” Their voice had dropped with considerable disappointment, clearly already aware of the answer to the question they had asked, but hoping they were wrong. Hushpuppy and I looked at each other with no small amount of concern.

“Um, this is it. This is my library.” They were suddenly uncomfortably close to me and I could feel Hushpuppy bristle on the other side of my ash-obscured vision. They had no eyes, but I could feel the intense eye contact they were making with me nonetheless.

“*Your* library, you say *now*. You said we would go to The Library.”

“...Yeah? It's The Library of Hushpuppy's Traveling Hou-” I began.

“No-no-no. Yes. I see. There is a conceptual disconnect here. What I am looking for is *The Library*. The Library of Witches, where the collective knowledge of all the Witches of generations millenia past was stored. The single greatest repository of knowledge in existence! Surely you know of it!” I shrugged in response to the Witch's explanation and they turned their head all the way around to look at Hushpuppy.

“*Surely* you do, though?” They repeated hesitantly.

I didn't see how Hushpuppy responded, but the Ancient Witch in front of me quivered before muttering, “**Unbelievable.**”

“I... um. I guess if such a place existed... I would really love to go there and read what I could...” I commented hesitantly, trying to bring the Witch out of her-

Wait...

The Library.

The Library!

“Actually!” The Ancient Witch's head turned to face me, “I- I think I might have some books from The Library!” I raised my left hand to point across the room at my desk with the two stacks of books that I'd yet to find the time to clear off from my research over a week prior. The last one I'd been looking at was still open on the desktop, I think it was called *Timorous Deeps* by-

“Eek!” I squeaked despite my immediate circumstances as the book in question suddenly appeared in my outstretched hand. I reflexively dropped it, but it fell only a few meters before an ashen limb reached out and engulfed it, moving it up to something approaching 'eye' level.

“This text... where did you get it, child?” The Ancient Witch asked slowly and with no small amount of suspicion in their voice.

“Umm... *That* one - I think - I removed from Calliope's Domain while cleaning as per our agreement.”

“Agreement?”

“In short, each Witch's Domain I clean... I am allowed to take any books or manuscripts that I find that aren't on shelves. So... yeah. If you open that one up, you'll see a seal that says 'Property of The Library'. I always thought there was supposed to be another line there. Like 'The Library of Something-or-Another'.” It was wild to think that such a place was real. If we could track it down, then that would be *amazing*. And with my much coveted skill set, I bet I'd even be allowed to use it, even as a Human!

Kaz'bek's ashes writhed and twisted before settling back into the rough shape of a person, “The other books on the desk then. Those are from The Library as well?”

“The ones on the left all bear the seal and were added to this library with my own hands. The stack on the right just kinda appeared through this archive overti-” My words caught in my throat as I felt the temperature in the room rise rapidly. Hushpuppy and I tensed up but took no action; we had no power over this entity.

“...The Library, as well as the fourth Librarian were still standing just prior to my death. What manner of calamity befell the others that books from The Library of Witches ended up in the archive of a *Human child*.” The Flame Witch’s voice dripped with utter contempt at those last two words, but then they shook their head, “My apologies. I did not come here to exchange barbs with you two. If texts from The Library are ending up here... Hmm... What is this era’s top knowledge archive?”

“Um... I guess that distinction would belong to the Drax’s Library of Sventholme.”

“**The Drax?! Ludicrous.** I am impressed that those little **accidents** are still alive and kicking... What in the world is Sventholme?” Jeez, now *that’s* a question.

Hushpuppy was apparently feeling rather left out of the conversation, as she suddenly interjected before I could respond, “It’s a country-wide protection racket more or less run by the eight Drax that share adjacent territories under one banner, known as Sventholme.”

“...” The Ancient Witch crossed their arms and looked back and forth between Hushpuppy and I. It wasn’t that there was a *discernible* look of disbelief on what passed for a face on them necessarily, but I could definitely *feel* their outrage. Hushpuppy and I both abstained from breaking the silence.

“You are telling me... that the *DRAX* have a **Coven** and you modern blazened Witches **don’t?!?**”

“A Cov-”

“YES! **That** is a Coven! Powerful entities staying close together for protection and multiplicative power through actual *order* and *alliance*. It is *such* an obviously better idea than whatever it is this *Tea Party* of yours is doing that I know not where to start in explaining why all of you are *bad* at this and should *feel bad*. Ugh... I wonder if there is any value in working with any of you Witches. Perhaps I should just start from scratch...” The menacing pile of ashes ‘stood’ up to its full over-two-meter height. They looked down upon me and whipped around to face Hushpuppy, who had already taken a low, guarded crouch on all fours.

Then there was a loud *snapping* noise and both of the Witches in front of me visibly flinched.

“Did you just-” Hushpuppy began, giving the Ancient Witch a rather perplexed look

“-Why did that not happen last time...” Kaz’bek asked rhetorically, looking around the room seemingly just as confused as Hushpuppy was, “Wait... you- Isn’t this **your** Domain?”

“Uh... No it’s not.”

““ ””
... ””

“What do you mean ‘it’s not’?!”

“I mean taking care of a Library is a pain in the ass that I *never* wanted anything to do with, so I told Nova that it was her problem.”

“...Granted. But it is surely still *part* of your Domain.”

“Nope. You’re not listening. I said I didn’t want it! If it was part of my Domain then it would be *my problem!*”

“You say that, yes. But it is *clearly* a Domain. That backlash we *both* just felt was *weak*, but it was due to the breaking of a Rule. If this Library isn’t *your* Domain... whose is it?” The Witch concluded her analysis with a question... and both Witches slowly turned their attention towards me.

“Very funny, you two. I’m a Human, remember? I don’t have enough Soul to power a Domain and-”

The Ancient Witch’s body separated and swirled about the room in a blinding storm of ashes as their cackling echoed throughout my library. I closed my eyes and covered my mouth, as I did not like the idea of inhaling millenia-old, sentient ashes. Eventually, the maniacal laughter subsided into a sinister chuckle as they brought their body back to a rough simulacrum of a terrifyingly tall Human. They walked back towards the door and faced Hushpuppy and I, who had shifted closer to each other during Kaz’bek’s little outburst. They waved a hand in the air briefly and I could feel my Coating tingle; Hushpuppy narrowed her eyes but said nothing. Looking back and forth between us, they quivered in something vaguely resembling excitement.

“Oh you two have *no* idea what you have done. And seemingly *completely* by accident.” They sounded like a child with a secret they were desperately trying not to share.

“What do you mean?”

“I *detest* repeating myself. Bring me to your Co- to your *Tea Party* and I will explain *everything* there.”

This.

Is.

So.

Awkward.

It went a little bit like this:

The Ancient Witch had strong-armed Hushpuppy into using the Sigil that Meverastethin gave us to call a Tea Party Meeting. I don't think we've had *this* many Tea Parties so close together in my *entire* life. We passed through *The Wrong Hallway* fairly quickly and made it to *The Eye of the Storm*. After we entered the wheat field of Human hair, I habitually began to brace myself for Meverastethin's teleportation magic. A few moments later I opened my eyes and realized that Hushpuppy had continued forward and Kaz'bek followed after her. I scampered after them as they began climbing invisible air steps towards the floating pavilion. They either forgot that I was with them or trusted me to pull off this particularly abstract Magic; either way, I managed to follow their example and walk up the 'stairs' after them.

We'd set up in the pavilion ahead of time... which is where things got awkward.

"Here you go." I said to Hushpuppy, pulling out her seat for her like always. Hushpuppy sat down and I pushed it slightly under her to assist her placement, then took my spot one step behind her and two to the left.

"Where shall I sit, then?"

"Um... I guess there are still technically two empty spots since Devili and Harenous were murdered," I pointed at a spot at the large table in the middle of the pavilion, closest to where the kitchen appears when it is time for me to begin brewing tea, "That's where Meverastethin sits. Then-" I traced my finger clockwise around the table, "- Viktor, Calliope, Selim, Devili, Hushpuppy, Harenous, Orchid, Malice and Felicity. Devili and Harenous are dead, so you should probably-

And then they flopped down onto Meverastethin's seat.

...

Which brings us back to this EXTREMELY awkward situation.

"**Hushpuppy.**" Meverastethin said ten or so *excruciatingly* long seconds after appearing out of thin air with six other Witches - all of whom were doing something akin to gawking at Kaz'bek - their presence looming over the table.

"Yep?"

"The Ancient Witch's escape was deemed a *you* problem. And you - **Hushpuppy** - were *supposed* to secure and return Kaz'bek to *The Slaughter House*. So how have you managed to do very nearly the **exact** opposite of that by way of: calling a Tea Party Meeting, bringing the Witch *here*, and making them an **Us** problem."

"Well-" Hushpuppy began.

"I am most certainly *not* here to hurt any of you... But by all means - Elder Witch Meverastethin - if you *do* believe I can be *contained*, then *do it*. I would love to see what the - allegedly - most powerful Witch of the era is capable of." The Ancient Witch's form writhed in Meverastethin's

chair, but did not rise to their 'feet'. Even with their posture so relaxed, Kaz'bek's presence was heavy - even in this *Wrong Place* - and every Witch present eyed them wearily.

Meverastethin was not one to be casually challenged and simply reached a grey-furred hand straight out, squeezed it into a fist - where a focal point appeared - and then rotated their fist with some apparent effort as if twisting a bundle of fabric. I glanced over at Kaz'bek and saw that the space which she occupied was twisting and... collapsing(?) in on itself. Meverastethin's other hand made a quick gesture and a sphere appeared which separated the space that Kaz'bek occupied from the rest of the pavilion, which began to rapidly contract, crushing the-

Kaz'bek gave a languid wave of their hand and the entire process stopped, the warped space smoothing out in an instant and the sphere simply... evaporating.

"Interesting display. But you are going to damage your chair... and we cannot have *that* now, can we? Everybody else... Take a seat." All of the Witches excluding Meverastethin found themselves occupying a spot at the table, sitting in chairs where possible or existing in their chosen space like Viktor. Kaz'bek herself was now occupying Harenous' seat on Hushpuppy's left-hand side.

"Meverastethin, would you kindly?" The cloying mass of ashes gestured at the seat she was previously occupying. Meverastethin narrowed their dark, vulpine eyes, but took a seat as directed.

And like that, the pecking order was established: Meverastethin was in charge, but Kaz'bek was in *control*.

"*Nova*."

"Y-yes!"

"...*Tea*." Was the extent of Meverastethin's command and I leapt at the task gratefully, not actually wanting to attempt to stand impassively behind Hushpuppy during such a tense discussion. For several minutes, they all just stared at each other across the table as I worked in the kitchen that Viktor conjured - as he normally did - in the far side of the pavilion. I wasn't even *at* the table and the silence was deeply unnerving... Throughout my entire life, I'd never been comfortable with the quiet and utter refusal of the lot of them to start their meetings without their tea.

I didn't know how Kaz'bek took their tea - or if they even did - so I just made them a moderate black tea with a slice of starfruit and performed one of the most important bits of Magic I'd been working on recently. Since the tea in front of me was being made for the Witches at the table, it belonged to them - not me - and thus should be over there, not over here. With nary a clink, all of the filled, steaming tea cups were in front of their respective Witches and the meeting would finally be able to proceed.

"Excellent. Moving on: You are out of your place and out of your time, Kaz'bek. What exactly is it you are trying to accomplish?" Meverastethin spoke slowly and deliberately, with only the

slightest of growls escaping into their voice. It was a testament to Meverastethin's... Confidence? Pride? Power? Foolishness? That they were maintaining this postured aggression even in the face of the complete and effortless shutdown of their Magic.

Kaz'bek sighed, "Nova: Sit." I suddenly found myself sitting in Devil's old seat, at Hushpuppy's right hand side, "Out of my time... what an interesting phrase. As if any time - any era - *belongs* to anyone. No Meverastethin, so long as one has the will and the means to persist... They are very much *in their time*. As to what I am trying to accomplish: I will answer that by asking you a number of questions that only **you** possess the necessary *age* to be able to answer." Kaz'bek's voice took an accusatory tone at the end of her statement.

"What happened to The Library, Meverastethin?" Kaz'bek asked simply after what might have appeared to be a deep breath for someone with a body.

"This hardly seems to be-" The ambient heat in the pavilion spiked unbelievably high for a windowless, open space in the middle of a freakin' storm.

"I **KNOW** you were present!" Kaz'bek's 'hand' poofed against the table, pluming into the air, "You were mayhaps but a babe of a Witch at the time, but you were *there*! Do *not* think you can lie to *me*. You are far too lacking in competence as an Elder Witch to cast me a defiant eye. I have been out of *The Vacuous Tower* for..." Kaz'bek turned their 'head' and looked at me for an answer.

"At least 3 to 4 weeks, I guess?" I offered.

"For 3 to 4 weeks... I could smell them. Dozens and dozens of Witches. Witches Blossoming *alone*. Hunting *alone*. Dying **alone**. Getting picked off by *Humans* of all things. Witch Hunting is a *profession*! *Witch Hunting*! And according to *this* Human here, the **Drax** have their own Library that is considered the greatest of this era! Why are there *so* many Fae on this continent? How can there be such an abundance of them with even a *single* Coven - however ramshackle - present?! Why does no one know how to properly use Magic?! What happened to the Library!? How are **you** still alive while everything that had been built is gone... **How** did **you** let this happen!?" Kaz'bek final statement was just shy of being shouted and I flinched at the indignation behind it. I snuck a glance at Meverastethin and saw that they were composed.

Composed but **furios**.

"How did *I* let this happen." Meverastethin repeated flatly, their slitted, predatory eyes glaring daggers into the Ancient Witch Kaz'bek, "Tell me, Kaz'bek, are you familiar with the concept of *spontaneous combustion*? Of course you are, but humor me for the benefit of the rest of those present. Spontaneous combustion is the ignition of material without any apparent application of heat from an external source. The definition is common between both Fek'thal and Human textbooks; both in its wording as well as its *short-sightedness*." Their voice dropped from its measured, deliberate tone at their final words... Turning their gaze towards Hushpuppy, whose position at the table being furthest from Meverastethin's own spot I suddenly became keenly aware of.

Kaz'bek did not respond and - after letting their gaze linger on Hushpuppy for a few moments longer - Meverastethin continued their explanation of events that predated my own life by over a millenia, "You seem to be under the impression that your decisions and actions only affected yourself. I regret to inform you that this impression is the furthest from reality one could possibly maintain. You asked me: 'how I let this happen'... How did Magical knowledge seemingly evaporate all at once? How did The Library of Witches disappear from reality? How did the population of living Witches drop to a mere handful? Why are there no Covens anymore? What happened that ended so very much related to the very identity of Witches. **You**. Happened. Kaz'bek."

"*What*." Kaz'bek growled with suspicion and I'm sure that if they'd had eyes to narrow, they would have.

Meverastethin leaned over their tea, resting their snout on their hand, "Do you have *any* idea what happened when you burned?"

"I know **excruciatingly** well what happened when I-"

"You do **not**."

"*Oh*? Then what - pray tell - happened when I burned?"

"*Everyone* **burned**." It was just two words. But Meverastethin delivered them with such... Conviction that not even Kaz'bek thought to balk at the notion, "Your Coven **burned**. Close Sister Covens **burned**... which you may recall was *all of them*. The 4th Librarian **burned**. The Library of Witches **burned**. Anything and everything that had a close, direct connection with your Soul just... **burned**."

The Ancient Flame Witch Kaz'bek was - for the first time since I met her - completely still. No writhing, shaking, or sloughing of barely contained Substance. Just... absolute, unnerving stillness and silence for almost a minute. The normally dull, distant roar of the storm seemed to respond to the tension and - with this being a *Wrong Place*, maybe it was - the room became deafening.

Or perhaps that was just my own heart screaming in my ears.

"Anything that was in proximity to you instantly and completely conflagarated. Not physical proximity, no. Intellectual, emotional... Metaphysical proximity. You, everyone like you, everyone who *liked* you, everyone who *thought* like you, everyone who wanted to *be* like you... All turned to ashes. After all... As you well know, Kaz'bek, *fire spreads*." Was that... *possible*?! I mean... I knew that the 12 Elemental Gods were *powerful*; they're Gods, after all. But isn't *that* just... Too much?

"So you asked - nay, *demanded* - that I explain how *I* could have let any of this happen. The simple fact of the matter is that everything fell apart *centuries* before I even had the power to do anything about it. Being a nascent, Covenless Fek'thal Witch was the only thing that saved me. So why did I insist you be hunted down? Why did I insist on no negotiations? No dialogue?"

Simply because I had no reason to believe that doing so *would not* result in this ‘*ramshackle Coven’s*’ immediate purging from this plane of existence by way of *divine inferno*.”

Meverastethin settled back in their chair and crossed their grey, furry arms, renewing their gaze on the Ancient Witch, “I may not be able to end this extant life you’ve cobbled together out of dust, grit, and your own leftovers... But I **do not** have to accept your existence as anything but an incalculably high risk. Thus, if your goal here is to utilize your surprisingly tremendous Soul to smother our collective will and assert yourself... then *do your worst*.” Meverastethin ended their monologue with a vicious growl and the rest of the Witches - save for Hushpuppy - glanced around at each other with a tense uncertainty as to why Meverastethin was seemingly ‘pushing her luck’.

But was she? I mean... if Kaz’bek had *that much of a bond with that* many Witches...

“...I-I see... It... So- Tyrsell really- I- So Dahlia is dead. Tiande- Th- They...” Kaz’bek’s stammering trailed off mournfully, “That... That is quite a lot of... Just *a lot*, I suppose.” The Ancient Witch sat there in silence for a couple of incredibly tense minutes as they digested the harsh truths that Meverastethin had confronted them with. They seemed to be mulling over something when a sound not unlike the wind blowing over shifting gravel emerged from the Ancient Witch before their mass began writhing again.

“...Where to start?... I- I suppose apologies are in order.”

...

“““““**What?!**””””” Meverastethin, Hushpuppy, myself, and a couple other Witches all blurted out in unison. The only Witch I’d ever heard apologize in my - admittedly short - lifetime was Hushpuppy... and only to me after a major crisis.

“It is obvious, truly. I made a number of- Ah... *assumptions* concerning Meverastethin’s competence and the state of the Co- *Tea Party*. But ignorance cannot be held against one that quite literally has no way of knowing any better. Yes, an apology, then a c-correction, followed by a clarification, and ended with an... offer. After which, you will answer a scattering of additional questions and then I shall be on my way.” Kaz’bek stood from their seat next to Hushpuppy, seemingly possessed with a sudden sense of purpose. They looked around at all present in the pavilion and - when no one else spoke - continued to speak.

“A correction, then: I am not here to harm any of you. I am generally unclear as to why that was everyone’s first assumption about my aim. But I will simply assume that the lifestyle of the contemporary Witch is significantly more violent than that of the Witches of my era and leave it at that. It’s unsettling how isolated the lot of you are - in terms of Domain proximity - and it makes me wonder if The Lonely Witch actually managed to survive this burning you described somehow... Which would bring me some small measure of comfort... but that is neither here nor there... *for now*.” The Ancient Witch Kaz’bek pushed back their chair and began sauntering around the pavilion. She paused for several moments to stare at each Witch present as she passed them, never ceasing her monologue.

“Now as for the clarification: it has to do with Tyrsell, Lord of Flame. It appears that the general, historical consensus on what occurred back then is that I stepped out of line and was struck down for possessing the audacity to do so. I wish to *dash* these rumors. I *challenged* the Elemental God of Fire to a duel for the ownership of the concept of Fire. That much is the infallible truth. However... My challenge was *accepted* and - as one in possession of significant power - making that challenge was my *right*. However, what happened to... to **everyone** after I lost was *incidental*.” Was it just me, or did their voice just... crack?

Kaz’bek looked out of one the pavilion windows silently for a few moments before continuing, “It was not a *punishment* laid upon all Witches. It was - as much as it pains me to admit - an accidental result of the sheer power on display by the Elemental Deity. It was a flashover from the raw intensity of the heat generated during our Duel. That the concept of a flashover wouldn’t fail to apply at the metaphysical level was a *drastic* oversight on my part and... The damage was - as you said - incalculable and the losses... immeasurable. *Truly*.” Her voice slipped into something resembling sorrow again. It was... bizarre, but I think my initial assessment just before she apologized was correct. I’d had a sneaking suspicion that the more I learned about this millennia old Witch, I would find less of an overpowered monster of might and Magic and more of a... *pillar* of the Witch community?

If *that* was the case... no wonder **most** Witches burned.

“Now then... An offer.” Kaz’bek returned to her seat and took a long, panning look around the entire Tea Party table, “If one considers that the unfortunate position Witches as a species is more or less... *my fault*. Then suffice to say, it is also then my responsibility to try and - if not repair the damage - then help to build up modern Witches to something approaching the apex predators we once were. Not hunted by Humans or Fek’tal or anything else. Secure, self-sustaining, and-”

“-This is dumb.” And suddenly, all attention was on the - in retrospect, strangely silent - Hushpuppy.

Hushpuppy

“-This is dumb.” I couldn’t help myself... I mean *come on*.

Meverastethin revealed the ever so *slightest* of bestial smirks as the heat in the pavilion spiked once more before commenting, “Oh? Do you have something to say, Hushpuppy?”

“Sure. Fine. Yeah I have something to say. Ancient Witch Kaz’bek, what is it that you actually *want*? We’ve been sitting through your various theatrics and dusty posturing. You feel bad that you got a bunch of Witches killed; murder by Soul-proximity or whatever. But whatever you choose to do next will *solely* be for your own self-satisfaction. Why should we care? Why should it even involve us?” I nodded at Nova, who was staring at me wide-eyed. I don’t know why she was so surprised; I thought Kaz’bek - despite her dusty bluster - had made it very clear that she wasn’t actually interested in hurting anyone in anything other than self-defense.

“How very... *reckless* of you, young Witch. I see now why you had them under surveillance, Meverastethin.” The table glanced around at each other, then at Meverastethin.

“Yes. She is very much like that... So it was you who destroyed my Window, then. How disappointing, I had some hope that she’d grown self-aware enough to notice my watching herself. I keep all of them under surveillance-” Meverastethin gestured at all present, which was met with varying degrees of surprise, “-Just in case they get any *dangerously stupid* ideas in their heads, like challenging a deity, or bringing the Ancient Flame Witch **here**.”

“Yes-yes, I’m in trouble and what not. We can deal with that later. Kaz’bek, you aren’t here to throw your power around, even though you absolutely could.” What was it Nova had said? Something about Mercy climbing hand under hand? Gah, I can’t remember, “Earlier you said you wanted The Library and that you wanted to have a chat with the Tea Party. Well, Meverastethin told you: The Library burned down... and everyone seems specifically insistent on *not* ‘chatting’ with you for self-preservation reasons. Therefore, there is nothing we can negotiate with in order to get what we want either.”

The ash-based simulacrum of a woman simply stared at me while my Elder Witch simply gave me one of their usual ‘what-the-fuck-are-you-playing-at-here-Hushpuppy’ looks. A sort of vulpine mixture of exasperation, contempt, and curiosity despite themselves.

I returned my elder’s stare, “So, Meverastethin?”

They paused for a while before letting out a low, growling sigh, “I have already said all that I am going to say until *they* can *prove* that our Tea Party will **not** turn to ashes by association. That aside, I cannot give them a Library I do not have. So it seems we have reached an impasse, Ancient Witch Kaz’bek. We have no way of forcing you to leave and you have no reason to acquiesce to our demands.”

The Ancient Witch was nodding slowly along with Meverastethin’s statement... Then she just chuckled.

“Yes... I see. So none of you *truly* know what has been done here. Completely incidentally and very much by accident.” Kaz’bek snickered to herself, quite amused by some mysterious bullshit, “It is indeed a fact that the physical Library of Witches and the 4th Librarian - my sweet Dahlia - burned. However, it is not so simple to destroy The Library. The *idea* of The Library did not begin with me and the *idea* did not end with me. It simply non-existed for a while until the concept found a proper place to exist. And since my exodus from *The Vacuous Tower*, I have found both The New Library **and** the 5th Librarian.” There was a bang as Meverastethin stood from their chair and slammed their hands upon the table. Wait... but wasn’t Kaz’bek just asking us about-

She couldn’t mean...

Kaz’bek placed an undulating, gritty hand upon Nova’s head, “It seems that the lot of you have a soft spot for this Human... And no wonder: she cooks, she cleans, she makes tea, and has managed to resurrect The Library of Witches.” Whaaaat...

"...**You lie**..."! Meverastethin practically growled the words. Viktor and Felicity seemed equally shocked, whilst the rest seemed to be generally uncertain as to the significance of this occurrence. Which - to be fair - I didn't really get it either.

"Lies, you claim. But you do not claim 'impossible', which makes me think you have an idea of how the two of them may have accomplished this. The Library of Witches *does* exist - albeit in a diminished form - and it was reborn through this child's Domain."

"Hooooold up. Humans can't have Domains. So it can't be-" I began, but the Ancient Witch cut me off.

"You said yourself, Hushpuppy: you didn't want a library and thus the library was Nova's problem."

Meverastethin muttered some extremely long, guttural Fek'thal curse before postulating, "...It is Domain formation by proxy. Constructed by Nova's will and Hushpuppy's surplus Soul using their bond as the bridge for siphoning and executing the necessary Magic." Huh.

"HAH! You did **what**?! Hushpuppy! Bwahahaha!" Calliope was - as usual - getting no small amount of amusement out of this revelation, "Who **gives away** part of their Domain!? I didn't even know that was possible!~ Hushpuppy strikes a-fucking-gain!" The rest of the table seemed to join her in her amusement. I for one was glad that the tension seemed to finally be broken. Everyone was getting waaay too serious about this meeting.

I looked over at Nova, who was typically completely silent but attentive unless specifically addressed during Tea Party meetings. She seemed to be in something of a daze, staring off into the middle distance. Knowing her, she was probably analyzing all of this new information and reconciling it with things she already suspected. Nova's a very smart girl.

"Now that we are all on the same page about who has what to offer, allow me to make my desires perfectly clear. I want Witches to be restored to their proper place at the top of this world. A world where Covens once again maintain the order of their territories and no one **dares** hunt a Witch for fear of damning their entire village to our retaliation. I want Magical knowledge to be reclaimed by contemporary Witches; just look at how so many of you are simply *falling apart*. You had no way of knowing... and I- So... So much was lost and no one was left to teach you... But *I* can. Which leads me to the last thing I want: to restore my Substance and live a proper immortal life as I dwell on the hard lessons of the past." The Ancient Witch ended her list of demands on a somber note. There were many nervous glances shared around the table; I suppose as much as everyone feared Meverastethin **and** Kaz'bek... The idea of ceasing their deterioration was definitely appealing to everyone.

Meverastethin continued their quiet glowering at Kaz'bek.

Kaz'bek completed her slow circuit around the pavilion, standing behind the chair she'd commandeered, "All of you are frightened - apprehensive - of my existence, my intentions, and possible consequences. You all want me contained - want me to keep a low profile - and you all

specifically do not wish to have a relationship with me... Meverastethin you seem particularly intent on not having me as part of your Coven, am I correct?"

"You are correct. So what, then? Do you intend to kill me and take this Tea Party?"

"**No!** By the Fire and Flames why is that *always* all of your first thought?! I can get everything I want here without any such *barbarism*. You do not wish for me to be one of yours, that is fine. I shall simply form my own Coven."

"Wait-" Meverastethin began.

Kaz'bek's momentum could not be stopped, "**Of course** I will form it with the rule of non-aggression towards all other Covens. I will even keep a low profile until I can prove to the lot of you that no one else will burn as a result of my existence."

"No but-" But the Ancient Witch continued to ignore her.

"Of course that means I will be staying with Hushpuppy." Hold up.

"I take exception to that."

"Wait, what!?" Nova blurted out, startled out of her daze.

The Ancient Witch turned their mass towards me, "We need to nurture both The Library **and** the new Librarian. Also, did your Elder Witch not say that I was **your** problem?"

"Uhh... Sure but-"

"You will keep a low profile?" Meverastethin jumped in all serious-like.

"Yes." Hey...

"You will stay confined to Hushpuppy's Domain?"

"Hushpuppy and Nova's Domains, but yes." I *do* have opinions about this, you know.

"You will not interfere with The Tea Party?"

"As long as you share Hushpuppy and Nova with me to start my Coven."

"Do I get a say in this?"

"**No.**" They both snapped at me. Well crap, I guess this is my life now.

"Then you will agree to a Restricted Covenant?" Meverastethin continued.

"And here I thought you did not know a thing. Of course, we can always make alterations later when you come around on the topic of me. And feel free to maintain your observation of these two for your own... *self-satisfaction*." The two damn old Witches each raised a hand at each other and a hyper-dense focal point appeared over the center of the table. It blebbed and stretched until it became a circle with some symbols I didn't recognize inside of it. A clawed

hand made of pulsing, raw Magical power reached out of both sides of the circle and grasped at the center of their chests. They both seemed to consider something for a bit and then brought their hands down to sever the hand from the circle, which then got pulled inside of them both.

Meverastethin sat back in their chair and let out a loooooong sigh of relief, "I did not think you would agree to that. For the time being, I suppose I can consider our *extinction* averted. I am tired. Everyone: **Leave.**"

With that, the Tea Party meeting was over.

And just like that, I was responsible for the Ancient Flame Witch of myth and legend.

Nova

"Do we *have* to do this now? I want to go to sleep." I groaned as I exited the washroom and found Kaz'bek waiting outside of my room. The Ancient Witch Kaz'bek, a roughly three **thousand** year old entity that had managed to survive a battle that very nearly resulted in the extinction of all Witches was just... Here. Like... She just freaking *lives* here. Mostly, she hangs out in my Library... Which is now apparently **THE** Library... Which is also apparently my **Domain**- something I did **not** expect to have until I decided to become a Witch someday.

"I do believe it would be appropriate to begin this process. You have put it off long enough." Ugh.

I sighed and opened the washroom door to The Library. I sat down at the new long, solid oak table that seemed to have grown out of the floor in the last month since Kaz'bek took up residence with us. I had not come into The Library pretty much *at all* since that crazy Tea Party meeting where Meverastethin and Kaz'bek had reached some kind of stable, Magically-enforced truce.

Kaz'bek sat their unstable form across from me, "Very good. I have never ceased to be impressed with how adaptable Humans are. It would be wise for us to teach you as much as we can *before* your Blossoming."

"Mmhmm... So what exactly is it that you *need* me to do? Let's get this done so I can go to sleep. I have been weirdly exhausted lately."

"Are you exhausted *now*?"

"I..." Thhhhhaaat's weird. I actually felt better than I had in *weeks*.

"You have been exhausted because you have been putting this off, child. You are the 5th Librarian of The Library of Witches. You need to start performing your administrative functions as The Librarian, or The Library *will* eat you alive. I have been feeding it in your place as a display of gratitude, but-

“Wow. Okay. Let’s get started then. Stand back” Why don’t Witches ever explain the important stuff up front? Kaz’bek shifted himself outside of the Library and I activated *Dust Bunny*, gathering up all the dust and opening The Library entrance to outside of the storefront. After SHOOMPIng the dust away, I closed the door and opened it back to the hallway where Kaz’bek waited.

“Okay. Come in.” Kaz’bek reentered The Library and I approached my circulation desk, unsurprised to see the left-side stack of books was taller than I had left it. Which meant that more books from the previous iteration of The Library had migrated here... somehow. At least that mystery was half solved. I started to pick up the books, but then had a thought.

“Return to your shelf.” And the books were gone.

“Excellent work, child.”

“Why thank you.”

“Oh Gods do you two get along now?” Suddenly Hushpuppy out of nowhere. I figured she was around *somewhere*, as she clearly didn’t trust Kaz’bek around me yet.

“The girl is a natural - and is rather used to interacting with Witches I would say - so it is hardly a surprise, dear Hushpuppy.”

“Gross, don’t call me that. And next time, if you know something that concerns her safety, say it *clearly* and say it *sooner*.”

I snickered, “Okay Pot, meet Kettle.”

“Not now, Nova!”

The Ancient Witch chuckled softly, “I shall keep this in mind. It is quite precious how much you care for her. You truly are quite a bit more like myself and my ilk than those Tea Party Witches, Hushpuppy.”

“I am *not!*” And thus Kaz’bek’s gentle bickering with Hushpuppy began anew. A routine that brought me no small amount of pleasure. Normally I did not get to see Hushpuppy interact with her peers - other Witches - and quite frankly, I don’t think Hushpuppy was used to it either... But I think it’s good for her. It was a bizarre and meandering path for us to arrive at this point, but it was kinda weird what you could get used to, given enough time. I think it’s pretty nice to have more Witches in the house, personally.

“-Fret not, Hushpuppy. Soon enough I will have the power to reopen my old Domain and connect it to this one.”

“Just open it and don’t connect it!”

“Now, now Hushpuppy... If the Library’s development turns out anything like that *Stuffed Cat Incident*, you are going to want me nearby!”

...

Seriously?

Nevermind, having more Witches in the house is the *worst*.